

A Spartan's Peaceful Heartbeat

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Summary: The war is over. Peace has no place for war-torn Spartans; John-117 is retired to live civilian life anonymously, if he can. But after years of destruction, can this man learn to create instead of destroy? Will he ever be able to let go of his demons and mourn his brothers and sisters? Or will humanity need its Master Chief back for a battle that may prove to be John's last?

1. Prologue

Soâ€¦ My second try at non-TMNT fanfiction. Please read and review! I enjoy thoughtful critiques. I've been struggling lately with academic writing style because I've been writing so much creative stuff, so I'd love to hear any thoughts about how my _creative_ writing style works out. This is just the first few pages of a story that is over 106,000 words so far and still going strong. _

Please note: The absence of the Chief's name is intentional. It's a plot device I'm trying out. Please let me know your reaction!

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****Prologue â€œ From Out of Nowhere****

"Admiral Hood!" Lord Hood motioned for the man at the monitoring station to speak, chewing idly at his cheek. It was a bad habit of his. "Unidentified Slipstream activity just outside range of our MACs, sir. Very close jump. Has to be Covenant technology."

"Set the warning level to amber," Lord Hood ordered, scrutinizing the screen. "Alert all personnel."

"Sir, yes, sir!" The man turned back to his station and spoke quickly into his microphone, alerting the forces surrounding Earth, the last safe place for humanity in the universe, that they had a visitor.

"Move into defense formation beta," Admiral Hood ordered, watching on the screen before him as the unmistakable purple hull of a Covenant cruiser began to emerge from the Slipspace bubble.

As soon as the ship was completely out of the bubble, the communications officer barked, "Sir! I have confirmation codes. It's the Arbiter."

Lord Hood frowned. Thel 'Vadam had left just over a week ago, and the trip to Sanghelios was at least three weeks in both directions. Something must have happened to turn him around; the admiral peered at the viewscreen but saw no obvious signs of destruction on the ship.

"Squawk ident and demand reason for return," Lord Hood ordered the communications officer. She turned back to her desk immediately and relayed his orders.

Lord Hood watched her closely; she listened for a moment to whoever was speaking on the other end and her face suddenly broke out into a large grin. She jumped up and turned to the admiral, who blinked at her reaction.

"They found the Master Chief!" she yelled excitedly. The entire bridge froze for a second.

"Patch me through, speaker," Lord Hood barked, hoping against hopes that it was true.

"Lord Admiral." That was unmistakably Thel's deep voice that rumbled through the speakers on the bridge. "I apologize for returning so abruptly, but I bring a peace offering."

Lord Hood felt a grin tug at the corners of his mouth, but remained serious as he responded, "What do you bring, Arbiter?"

"Master Chief Petty Officer Sierra-117, reporting for duty, sir."

The deep voice that spoke over the speakers sent a thrill through Lord Hood. One of his soldiers â€" a damn war hero to boot â€" was alive. The bridge erupted into cheers and the communications officer quickly silenced the microphone in front of the admiral so the cacophony wasn't transmitted. Even the admiral himself grinned widely before barking at everyone to settle down.

The Master Chief had been missing for nearly a year. Probes had been sent out constantly, searching for any and all UNSC distress beacons. There had been a couple of responses â€" one had been the remnants of a long-dead UNSC battleship, the other a false alarm caused by some sort of radio interference from a nearby Cortez star.

"You're late," he said sternly, unable to keep the relief from his voice.

"Sorry, sir," the Chief responded, his voice bland. "It won't happen again."

"Do you have Cortana with you?"

"Right here, admiral." Cortana's smooth female voice sent another wave of quiet cheers through the bridge. The Chief was famous on his own, but together, the pair was damn near god-like in the eyes of the public. The only team that could compete was Cortana, the Chief, and the Arbiter, or a group of Spartan-IIs before they were spread too thin to pair up towards the end of the war.

"Good to hear your voice, both of you. We'll send a transport to pick you up." Lord Hood flicked a finger at one of the officers standing nearby; he saluted and quickly left to carry the message and find a pilot and a ship.

"Thank you, sir."

"Welcome back, you two. Humanity has missed you."

Back on the Sangheili ship, Cortana smiled on her holographic pedestal. She watched carefully through the ship's cameras â€" Thel had granted her access to the system, though she could have easily overridden his security if she wished â€" as a cruiser flew towards them from the armada around Earth.

The Master Chief stood silently for a moment and then said quietly, "Thank you, Thel." The Arbiter nodded his head gracefully.

"I shall see you soon, Spartan," the Sangheili said deeply. "I must return to Sanghelios and ensure the safety of my kin and state. Then I will return to the peace talks between our races."

The Chief nodded and extended a hand to Cortana, who grasped his glove in her holographic hands and transferred herself back into his suit's chip. She felt her processing power drop as she did so and lamented; she had spent the months marooned in the dead of space processing all the information from the Gravemind and Forerunner artifacts she had come across, finally having the time and power to do so.

Cortana processed a feeling of trepidation, an instinctual program that rarely led her wrong, as she remembered the giant Flood form. She banished it and focused on the human she had been partnered with years ago. The Chief had been unreasonably quiet; he usually had a small amount of banter for her when she first rejoined him in the MJOLNIR armor.

Cortana knew that his being rescued wasn't exactly an improvement. The war was over, they had learned from Thel. There was no place for a warrior like the Spartan-II in peace. Thel struggled himself, having been a fighter all his life, but he had been put to use by his superiors as a diplomat. He was a hero to humanity in his own way, though that image was mostly sustained by the stories of the Master Chief and the Arbiter fighting the Flood and Covenant loyalists side-by-side and back-to-back.

"Are you okay?" Cortana asked the Chief as he walked quickly down to the hangar bay where the human ship would be able to dock with the

Sangheili ship.

The Spartan grunted affirmative; she waited patiently and then cleared her throat. He sighed slightly but obediently answered. "I don't know what is waiting for me," he admitted. "I want a shower, food, and some sleep. But I doubt I'll get it right away."

Cortana made a sound of comfort and understanding, though she hadn't ever experienced showering, eating, or sleeping first-hand. She could power herself down if the situation demanded it, but she hadn't in years â€" she preferred to be awake and absorbing information every moment of her short AI life.

"I'm sure everyone will agree a shower is in order if you remove your helmet," she teased lightly, rewarded by a slight chuckle. They remained in silence for the rest of the wait as the ship approached quickly.

The two ships mated awkwardly and the hatch in front of the Chief slowly hissed open. The Spartan marched into the empty bay and up to the front where the pilot was quick to close the connection and turn towards Earth.

"Good to have you onboard, Chief," the pilot said as she expertly flew the small cruiser towards the fleet orbiting above Earth. Behind them, the Arbiter's ship turned and headed out-system quickly.

"Good to be back," he answered stoically. "Is there a group waiting for us on board?"

The pilot nodded slightly. "Yes, sir. I believe the admiral put together a quick little welcome-home for you, sir. You've been missing for a year, after all. The public wants to know you're alive."

The Chief grunted. "Cameras?"

"Not yet. No reporters were on-site today." The pilot chuckled when the Spartan sighed in relief.

Cortana spoke briefly with the pilot, gathering information on the current state of things. Thel had been able to tell them little about the human casualties and remaining population in the week it had taken them to return to the Sol system. The Sangheili medics aboard the ship â€" a token crew, mostly there because they hadn't been rotated in the chaos when the Human-Covenant war ended â€" had treated the minor freezer burns on the Spartan from cryo. They had also offered to clean and repair his armor, but the Chief refused politely. He rather liked the dings, so long as they were small.

Thel had presented him with an energy sword, a token of appreciation and a formal way of initiating the Spartan into the ranks of the Sangheili. It was a short ceremony that the Spartan endured, knowing that having official rank among humanity's new allies may work in his advantage in the future. Thel, with the approval of the entire crew, had presented him with the energy sword now safely stored in the "pocket" in the MJOLNIR's thigh armor and officially named him after the Sangheili tradition.

The name, which the human couldn't pronounce correctly because it required a split jaw to speak, meant "courage" in Sangheili, Thel had explained afterwards. Most of the crew called him "Demon," however, when he passed them in the hall or during meal times. A select few referred to him as "Reclaimer" after 343 Guilty Spark's designation for all humans. Thel still referred to him as "Spartan," which the Chief accepted more readily than any other name he had been given by humanity or any Covenant race.

Living with the Sangheili on their ship had taught the Spartan a lot about their culture. Meal times were strictly enforced; the only way to get out of eating with the group was if you had guard duty. Armor was worn at all times; the Chief had taken a short shower just before the medics had examined him out of armor, but they had no human clothing so he was quickly back in his armor and had stayed in it since then. Sangheili salutes included a honorary warble that mean something along the lines of "greetings to you, higher-ranked one" and a fist over the heart in their chest, head bowed. When a higher-ranked Sangheili greeted a lower-ranked one, the lower-ranked one never interrupted.

The discipline and organization on the ship was incredible. Everyone had a set job or duty, and no one went into cryo. The crew was skeleton-sized, but each had an important task. Sangheili kept 38-Earth-hour days, according to Cortana's calculations, which the Chief had quickly accustomed himself to. They worked 20-hour shifts, as bridge crew, food crew, or other duties, and had two hours designated as leisure time, though most Elites spent that time training and sparring in the large onboard gym.

The Spartan had been invited to join them regularly, in groups of twos and threes, and had proven himself worthy of his title and name several times over. He shared human tactics and strategy with Sangheili warriors, most of whom were veterans from the Human-Covenant War. In turn, they related legends and tales of their culture, animating the stories sometimes with skits and, in the case of battle stories, play fights. Elites tried to teach the human how to speak their language, to frustrating results. However, the Sangheili easily learned English and could speak it fairly well.

The Chief quickly learned that the Elites were not so different from humans. Their legends and culture was different, and they held to a strict moral and ethical code, but they enjoyed sharing their stories just as much as any human. They teased each other, though their humor was something the Spartan did not share, and taught each other.

The entire week the Chief had been on the ship, only one major event occurred. A lower-ranking Elite had insulted a superior, the human had gathered. The matter was quickly resolved with a ceremonial sparring. Thel had explained that such duels were traditionally to the death, but on a ship and with such a small insult "it had included something about intentionally not making way to the superior in a hallway" the battle would be fought until honor was satisfied. The lower-ranked warrior had been taken to the medical bay with a small concussion when the battle was over, and was pronounced fit and healthy "though irresponsible and stupid" the next shift.

Cortana's voice brought the Chief back to the present as the cruiser docked with the destroyer UNSC Stormy Horizon. The pilot opened the

hatch and called a cheerful goodbye as the Spartan quickly disembarked.

Despite the short notice, the bay was packed with UNSC personnel craning to get a glimpse of the Master Chief, apparently risen from the dead. The Spartan ignored the loud eruptions of cheers, whistles, and calls of "Welcome back!" that rose when he stepped out of the airlock.

Admiral Hood stepped forward, commanding the Chief's attention. He had to shout to be heard over the noise. The Spartan snapped to attention and saluted.

"Welcome back, Chief," the admiral said formally, returning the salute. "At ease. Let's find somewhere quieter to talk."

Gladly, the Chief thought to himself. He followed Lord Hood towards a corridor, leaving the cheers behind him. Cortana remarked dryly, "You could at least wave."

"They have their hero," the Chief responded solemnly, muting his speakers to talk to Cortana alone. "I need not fuel their fan-like behavior."

Cortana snorted. "You've spent too long with soldiers."

The Spartan refused to answer that and concentrated on following Lord Hood, who took them to his personal office. They passed several dozen UNSC personnel on the way, all of whom quickly got out of the way and saluted, grinning from ear-to-ear at the sight of the presumed-dead war hero.

When they entered the office, Lord Hood quickly sealed the door and sat behind his desk. "Have a seat, Master Chief," he said, waving to a chair.

"With all due respect, sir, it won't support me," the Chief said ruefully.

"Ah, yes, my apologies." The admiral smiled slightly. "Then let me bring you up to speedâ€¦"

The Spartan listened as his commanding officer described a world that had no need of him anymore except as a public icon of bravery and perseverance. He kept his reaction to himself, however, and handed over Cortana when asked, storing her chip in the admiral's desk. Lord Hood ordered him to shower, eat, and do whatever he needed to do; a press conference was scheduled for 0900 the next morning, nearly eighteen hours away.

The Chief found his assigned quarters and shut himself inside, quickly removing his armor and taking a hot shower, lingering slightly as he attempted to sort through the information he had gathered. There had been no word from or about his fellow Spartans who were still missing. The Brutes were taking control of the Covenant Loyalists. He had been promoted to Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy, apparently posthumously, but the rank would stand now that he was confirmed alive.

The UNSC was severely downsizing, hiring more engineers to work with

Sangheili technology to build a few fleet of Covenant-inspired human ships but firing Marines, ODSTs, and other fighting personnel in droves. They kept a token security force, of course, but the Covenant Loyalists weren't nearly ready to launch even a weak offensive. In that news, the Chief read his own retirement as inevitable. The thought filled him with a sense of discomfort, almost nervousness. He had only ever known military life; he didn't know how to function outside of it.

These thoughts plagued him until he ordered himself to sleep, feet hanging off the too-short cot as he quickly fell into a deep sleep. His green armor shone iridescently in the corner where he had carefully laid it out on the shelves and floor.

2. Medal of Tharos

Please enjoy the real story now. I hope the preview got your attention!

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Chapter 1 â€" Metal of Tharos

Cheering filled the stadium as Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy Sierra-117, Spartan II, walked up onto the stage. His booted feet clunked noisily, but the audience drowned the noise easily. The stage floor had been specially reinforced before this show, he knew, so he stepped up with confidence and crossed to where the Admiral and a select group of brass waited for him. In his armor, Sierra-117 stood at just over seven feet tall and weighed just under 1300 pounds. The iridescent armor glowed faintly, though the Spartan had manually deactivated the shields for the occasion, faded and chinked in several places from its last battle.

The Chief saluted Fleet Admiral Terrence Hood, who returned the salute, his blue eyes kind. Lord Hood motioned for the audience to stop cheering; it took a few seconds, but eventually it was quiet. The lights above them made Lord Hood's white hair shine slightly. He stood almost a foot shorter than the Chief in his armor, and was of a muscular build, though his age was showing in the slightly saggy skin about his cheeks and eyes. The stress-lines around his mouth, over his forehead, and at the edges of his eyes were evidence of years of service in the UNSC.

The admiral turned back to the Spartan-II. "Master Chief Sierra-117, you have been an example of bravery and heroism in the past thirty years. You have earned every medal we can offer except Prisoner of War, for which the Covenant is undoubtedly grateful." There were a few chuckles in the four-hundred-person crowd watching. "Therefore, we of the UNSC have decided to award your courage and dedication with a new medal, one that will only be given to those who show the Spartan-II attitude." Behind his helmet, the Spartan-II blinked. "This is now the highest medal the UNSC will ever bestow upon any person; it is called the Medal of Tharos. The inspiration for your training and name came from ancient Sparta, and "tharos" means "courage" in ancient Greek. "

Lord Hood opened a shiny mahogany box and lifted a medal from it; it was gold-plated, the Chief noticed, and the insignia was of the UNSC eagle perched atop a MJOLNIR helmet in relief. The etching on the back simply said, "MCPON SII-117" in detailed black lettering. Hood clipped it to a small bar welded into place on the chest plate just for this occasion, to avoid the awkwardness of handing it to someone, which was supposed to happen only in the case of a posthumous award to the nearest family member.

"Congratulations, Master Chief."

"Thank you, sir." The Spartan in the green armor saluted again; the entire assembly rose and returned the salute.

"Speech!" Someone yelled from the back; the Chief shook his head slightly. "Speeeeech!" The crowd roared. Lord Hood motioned for him to take the podium.

Sierra-117 took a deep breath and, doing something he found worked well for situations such as these, obeyed his instincts. He stepped up with a clunk to the podium and waited for the raucous crowd to settle down. Then he turned on his helmet speakers and spoke, his hands behind his back and standing at attention.

"I am glad that I was able to serve you all for as long as I did," he started. He had never been much of a speaker, especially in large groups. "Though they are not with us today, my fellow Spartan-IIs are also proud of having served with every single one of you." The ONI big shots had finally allowed that the Spartans who were actually dead to be listed as KIA; a few were actually MIA and listed as such.

"Humanity has a long road ahead, but we are here to see it through. That is something I cannot take credit for; I am just one man. It was the entire fleet's dedication and courage that saw us through the past decades of war. We all did it, together, and that is what counts."

This was a human-only audience, so there was a lot of cheering at the end of his speech as the Chief stepped back so the admiral could take his spot back at the podium. Lord Hood began a long speech regarding the Master Chief's contributions to the peace that had finally taken hold of the humans and Covenant factions. The Chief listened with one ear, occupying himself with thoughts as he bore the admiration.

He had been rescued by his friend the Arbiter earlier that year. The war, he found, had ended â€" officially â€" a year ago, in 2553. Thel 'Vadam had been on his way back to his home-world, Sanghelios, when he had picked up a distress signal, UNSC in origin. He had investigated out of curiosity, dropping from Slipspace just long enough to look for any abnormalities on radar, and had found the back half of the ship that had carried him to safety and trapped his ally.

Thel had immediately sent a team of Sangheili to search the ship. They had found Cortana easily, and she had directed them to where the Spartan himself was just waking from the cryosleep. The Chief remembered the feeling of adrenaline surging through his body as he opened his eyes to find a crowd of Sangheili around him, waiting for

him to wake up completely. He had nearly attacked them as his brain attempted to formulate memories and coherent thought, indicating that Cortana had unfrozen him quickly.

Once they were safely aboard the Arbiter's ship, Thel had immediately reversed course and brought him back to Earth. The Spartan had been greeted enthusiastically and was quickly brought up to speed. The Covenant had mostly disbanded; many of the Prophets had been assassinated. The Brutes were leading a small faction of Covenant Loyalists, but they were also growing stronger. The Sangheili and humans were attempting to formalize a treaty between the two races, arguing over territories, economic trade, and other things that slowed the process.

Thel had left after dropping his ally among his own kind, back to Sanghelios to see his family and bring the planet up to speed as to the relationships between humans and Sangheili, both personal and political. The Arbiter had expressed interest in holding a Sangheili-only award ceremony for "the Demon" and giving John a set of specially-made armor that would resemble a Zealot's armor. However, since he was retiring "almost forcibly" the Spartan had declined, saying instead that peace was more important than shiny armor to him. Thel wasn't of the same mind, armor being the symbol of status amongst his kind, but agreed.

Humans, however, were not so focused. Half of Lord Hood's time was spent handing out medals and retiring veterans after years or decades of war, the Chief knew. Unfortunately, he couldn't just get a private meeting and a clap on the back. Because of his status as the last available Spartan, he was forced to endure a whole menagerie of meetings, audiences, and award ceremonies, posing for the press. He served as a spark of hope that the war was truly over, and as a deterrent against any uprisings. His friendship with the Arbiter was well-known throughout all alien races, and as a team, they wrecked destruction upon enemies that could be compared to a nuclear bomb.

Such preoccupation did keep him from wondering what he would do with himself, though. All of his life, Sierra-117 been in the military. He wasn't sure how to function in civilian cities, with no clear-cut chain of command. "Hell, I've never even seen or used a bank card," the Spartan thought to himself.

Lord Hood was just finishing his closing speech when the Chief turned his attention back to the proceedings. The admiral then guided the contingent on stage down to the floor where the entire auditorium seemed hell-bent on shaking the Spartan's hand. The Chief exchanged empty pleasantries with some, commented on battles they shared with others, and shrugged off questions as to where he would go and what he would do constantly.

Finally, the crowd ebbed. The Chief was secretly glad to see that Lord Hood was fidgeting; it made him feel better for wanting to get away. A news crew came up next, a camera peering into the Spartan's faceplate like it was trying to see through the opaque visor.

"So, Master Chief," a bright young woman twittered. "Where will you go next?" She blinked prettily at him, her small brown eyes filled with curiosity. She flipped her black hair behind one shoulder and hefted the large red purse hanging at her side further onto her

shoulder as she spoke.

"I'm not sure," he answered as calmly as possible. "I have been retired from duty, so I suppose I will find a life in the civilian world."

"Why not let us get a peek at the _real_ Master Chief?" the woman suggested coyly, reaching up to tap his faceplate. The Chief shifted backwards slightly, uncomfortable with being so close to anyone. People generally didn't tend to touch him, either, unless it was to shake the hand of a bona-fide hero.

"I am not comfortable with that, ma'am. I would like anonymity when I leave the UNSC."

"And the UNSC will not be releasing any information on Master Chief Spartan-117's location or contact information when he goes, either," Lord Hood said from the side. "He has earned a life without being mobbed by you news people." The man spat out the word like it was tasteless.

The woman pouted, her blue eyes twinkling at the admiral. "That's a matter of public record," she sniffed. "The Freedom of Information Act--"

"Does not cover classified information," Hood said firmly. "And this is considered classified by ONI."

The woman bounced on her toes, making her ample chest jiggle. Both men's eyes never left hers; clearly, this woman was used to using her feminine assets to get a juicy story.

She turned back to the Chief with a huff; Lord Hood chuckled lowly. "Well, then, I guess we'll conduct this interview _anonymously_. Tell me, Master Chief, do you have a name?"

"Yes."

She waited, and then tapped her foot once. "And it isâ€|?"

"Sierra-117." The Spartan caught a glimpse of Lord Hood smirking to his right, but the admiral quickly wiped the expression from his face.

The woman sighed. "No, I mean, your real name. Like mine's Jessie!" She offered her hand with a bright smile; the Chief shook it slowly.

"I have always been called Sierra-117 or Master Chief." He shrugged, a delicate move in the MJOLNIR armor that was lost on the clueless reporter.

"That's silly. What about all the other Master Chiefs in the UNSC?"

"When someone says _the_ Master Chief, everyone knows who it is," Lord Hood said solemnly. "Especially when things start blowing up."

Jessie huffed again, clearly agitated by the stonewalling she was receiving. "Will you at least tell me a little about yourself?"

The Chief thought for a moment. "I was raised alongside thirty of the most dedicated, courageous, and intelligent people in the universe," he finally said softly. "My brothers and sisters are everything to me."

"And to the Navy, Spartan," Lord Hood said quietly.

Jessie nodded, her eyes misty "too misty," Lord Hood noted. It was clear that she was faking sympathy. "No one knows who you are, or where you came from. Is it true you were kidnapped as children?"

"No comment," Lord Hood said quickly. "All information regarding the Spartan-IIs, not to mention the IIIs and IVs, is classified."

Jessie groaned softly, obviously dramatizing. "What can you talk about? What are you looking forward to the most, Master Chief?"

Sierra-117 thought for a moment. "I suppose" Fresh food."

Jessie laughed. "Do you have a favorite?"

The Spartan shook his head. "No, ma'am. Soldiers eat MREs."

"Ewww," Jessie shuddered in disgust. "Well, if you're ever in Los Angeles, I suggest this great Oriental place, The Wandering Dragon. They have the best sushi and egg rolls. It's to die for."

"I will keep that under advisement," the Chief said carefully. He hadn't decided where he wanted to live, but he doubted it would be anywhere in a big city. None of the Spartans had ever enjoyed crowds, and after living on a cramped ship, he knew he would be most comfortable in a small cabin in the middle of nowhere.

"Is there anyone waiting for you here on Earth?" The Chief shook his head silently. "That's too bad. You sound like a very handsome man under all that armor. Is it true your augmentations enlarged everything?" Jessie twittered as both men stared at her.

Lord Hood cleared his throat, trying to hold back a laugh, and gestured for the Spartan to answer. Frowning, he finally managed, "Yes, I suppose" He wasn't modest, but still, he had no time to consider whether he was Well, whether he had anything to boast of like most of the soldiers he had known or overheard.

"Well, that's all the time we have for today!" Jessie flounced off; the camera operator grimaced apologetically at the two men and then hurried after her.

"I hate news people," Lord Hood growled. "Well, son, looks like you have only one more mission."

"Sir?"

The admiral looked into the Chief's golden visor and managed to make eye contact, though he didn't know it. "Have a good life, son," he said softly. "You deserve it."

"Thank you, Admiral Hood."

"Terrence." Hood offered his hand; the Chief took it carefully.

"John." It felt weird, giving his name; only his Spartans and Dr. Halsey had ever called him "John," except perhaps Mendez once or twice during training. It was that or "worm" during training, and "sir" after it.

3. A New Start

Chapter 2 "A New Start

The Spartan and MJONIR armor stared at each other silently. They were finally saying goodbye. The MJOLNIR stood on its rack and would be kept in ONI's security vaults for now. Authentic battle damage made it valuable. They had been through a lot together, and it had saved his life, and the lives of hundreds of soldiers, too many times to count.

With a final mental farewell, the former Chief hefted his backpack that contained all the items he owned "his toothbrush, comb, razor, dress uniform, medals, and Sangheili energy sword" and headed for the exit, leaving the armor for the technicians to transport to its new home.

John felt different. He was dressed in a polo shirt with khaki pants and smart black shoes. He knew he looked polished, like he was going to another awards ceremony, not the airport. His brown hair was combed back, his face newly shaved. It was harder than most people thought to look as professional as he did, sporting so many scars "they made shaving difficult, but he had gotten used to it.

At the desk in the front lobby, a friendly young man gave him his passport, ID, and bank card "everything he needed to start a civilian life. A transport Warthog was waiting outside; a gift from the UNSC. It was too light to do anything but shuttle people around, and John needed a vehicle, so Admiral Hood had pulled some strings and gotten ONI to sign it over to him as a personal transport.

John glanced back at the base one last time as he climbed into the driver's seat. The plain concrete structure was the kind of building he had known his entire life. The bright sun above him made his extremely pale skin glow; around the base, miles of scrubland separated the military compound from the rest of the world.

It felt different to sit outside without his armor on; the seat cushion was harder than he had thought, and the world felt a lot bigger now that he was nearly naked in it. It made him nervous, almost, but he smoothly started the engine with an ancient key system. It purred to life and rumbled comfortably as he pulled out of the base's parking area. A guard stopped the former Spartan at the gate to check his papers and then released him, and John-117 drove into his civilian life with head held high.

ONI had created a new civilian identity for him. Some witty ONI technician had named him "John Leonidas" after the ancient Spartan

king who had led his team's namesakes into battle against Xerxes. They had given him a driver's license, too, which listed his weight at 300 pounds " a little over " and 6'10" " just right. His eyes were hazel with flecks of gold; his hair was brown. he was not listed as an organ donor mostly because his augmented DNA would never fit anyone else but another Spartan, and even then, the only matches he had were to dead brothers and sisters.

John drove through scrubland and the occasional stunted tree to the nearby Australian Airport; passenger jets screamed overhead as they took off, making John's ears ring. He had a flight planned that would take him into the Rocky Mountains, where Colorado had once been; it would take nearly twelve hours of travel to reach North America from Australia.

The mountains were the perfect setting, and reminded him of Reach during his training years. Cortana had obligingly found him a home that was for sale based on his requests. He didn't want to have to hunch over, for example, and didn't want close neighbors. After looking through the half-dozen houses she found, he had chosen one that was an hour's drive from the nearest city large enough to support a shopping mall where he could hopefully find clothing that actually fit. It was a ranching community, she had warned him " he had responded that he would find something to do, surely.

John wasn't so confident as he parked the 'Hog. It would be flown and then driven to his new home, while he flew himself. Placing his backpack on his shoulders, John headed into the terminal. Immediately, he was assaulted by unfamiliar scents and sounds. There was no cohesion that he could see in the crowd milling about before the ticket lines. His beloved structure, the organization of the military, was gone.

John made his way to the airline he planned to fly with and presented the woman at the ticket counter with his passport and flight confirmation. He studiously ignored the whispers and stares from the crowd; the woman pretended not to notice his myriad of scars, clearly visible on his face and forearms, as she handed him his boarding pass, directed him to the terminal, and wished him a good flight.

John made his way to the nearest ATM first. He knew he had to get out some money " the entire concept was foreign to him " for food and supplies. John swiped his card at the ATM and it beeped in a friendly tone. The structure was a light grey and shielded slightly so no one could read his transactions around him.

Please type in your Personal Identification Number. This message was written in several human languages, and John could read them all. He quickly punched in 0-1-1-7.

Thank you. What would you like to do today, Mr. Leonidas?

John selected the button for Withdrawal.

Please enter an amount divisible by 20 credits.

John thought for a moment and then asked for 500 credits. The machine whirred, churned, and spat out a thick wad of fifties.

Would you like to make another transaction?

John signaled no and signed out of the terminal, taking his cash and placing it securely in his pocket. He would need a wallet to hold that, and his various cards, soon.

Things were easier in the military, John thought to himself. _No finances, no wallets, no identification cardsâ€¦_ He hadn't even checked how much he had in the bank, but the admiral had assured him that he was set for life.

John made his way to the terminal just in time for first-call. Being a veteran of the recently-ended war, John was able to board first. He was greeted by the flight attendants with gratitude for serving in the military, but their smiles didn't reach their eyes, and he could hear the pair of women talking about him as he sat in his window seat at the back of first class. He wouldn't fit in the economy cabin and Hood had warned him that first class wasn't much better. Indeed, John's hair brushed the ceiling as he sat down; his knees touched the tray in front of him. The cabin slowly filled up; John watched idly as harried mothers herded young children into seats, teenagers tuned out on miniature music players, and older folk hunched their way into the cabin.

"We'll be taking off in a moment, ladies and gentlemen. I hear we have a few recently discharged UNSC personnel on board today. From Airways United and all of us on board, it is a pleasure to serve you. Thank you for your service." The speaker cut off with a hiss.

The hatch was closing just as a female voice cried, "Wait!" The two flight attendants opened the door to admit a very late, and very mussed-looking, middle-aged woman. "Sorry!" she called to everyone as she scooted into the plane. "So sorry!"

She fell into the seat next to John with another apology and was preoccupied for a moment with shoving her bag under the seat in front of her. Then she leaned back and glanced at her neighbor. "Hello!" Her eyes were a dark blue; her hair was tangled but shoulder-length and a light brown. John estimated her weight at about 150 pounds; she was strongly built but not especially muscular. She obviously worked outside; her skin was very tanned.

John looked over; he saw the surprise, then pity, in her pale blue eyes as she took in his scars. "Hello, ma'am," he said softly.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to stare," she murmured, looking at the tray in front of her.

John shrugged slightly. "It's alright."

"If I may askâ€¦ Were you in the war?" She seemed curious as she made eye contact.

John nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

The woman offered her hand; John shook it carefully. Even without his armor, he knew he could do damage if he was careless, especially to her dainty hand.

"I'm Rebecca, please," she chuckled. "My name's Rebecca. My mother was ma'am." She smiled, inviting him to share the joke. John wasn't used to smiling with strangers but he made himself curve his lips slightly anyway.

"Rebecca." John tested the name on his tongue; he decided he liked it. "I'm John." It felt weird, giving his name to a stranger â€" _well, not such a stranger any more,_ he thought â€" and refusing to give it to a reporter.

"Lovely to meet you. I bet you get this a lot, but thank you â€" you know, for your service." John nodded, looking out the window. Rebecca wasn't fazed. "I'm bred and raised here on Earth, but I haveâ€| Hadâ€| family on New Jerusalem."

New Jerusalem had been glassed in 2552, John remembered. "I'm sorry to hear that."

Rebecca smiled slightly. "So, where're you going? Got some family here on Earth?"

John shook his head. "My familyâ€| Was on Reach." It wasn't entirely a lie; his Spartans were his family, and quite a few had died on the planet that had been their home during training.

"Oh." She frowned slightly, pity again in her eyes. "Where are you going, then, if you don't mind my asking?"

"To the Rocky Mountains."

"The Rockies are amazing. What part?"

"The San Juan range."

"I live there!" Rebecca grinned. "Whereabouts are you moving to?"

"I bought a small house on Lake Leynore."

"That's about fifteen minutes' walk from my house," she said excitedly. "I live just across the way, near Decks Creek. Chichi and I go play in the lake a lot."

"Chichi?"

"My dog. She's a Newfie."

John raised an eyebrow in confusion. Rebecca launched into a tale about what Newfies â€" Newfoundland dogs â€" were like, and especially Chichi. "She's the most lovable dog in the world," she assured him.

"If everyone could turn their attention to the front, your flight attendants will now go through emergency procedures," the speaker overhead hissed. John glanced up to see the attendant smiling prettily as she held up the safety card from the pocket in front of him.

John caught Rebecca rolling her eyes. "I've flown so much I could _give_ this lecture, in my sleep with my hands tied behind my back," she muttered.

"Considering they require their hands to manipulate the devices, I doubt it," John responded.

"It was a joke," she said, eyeing him. John simply nodded. "You're not a nervous flier, are you?"

John almost laughed. A nervous flier? No. There was nothing that scared him about flying; it was just controlled falling, and how many times had he fallen uncontrollably? He didn't like being in planes simply because he couldn't affect the outcome if it decided to failâ€¦ Or if the Covenant shot it down.

"No, ma'am."

"I told you about that ma'am thing," she scolded.

"Sorry, ma-â€¦ Rebecca."

"Better." She grinned winningly at him and pulled the Airtime Mall Magazine from the pocket in front of her. "These are boring, but it's kind of cool to see what they have."

John simply nodded and pulled a book from his backpack. He had purchased it just before boarding as a deterrent to thinking about what was coming in the next few days. The plane taxied into the runway and rumbled into the air. He ignored the pull of gravity - though it was difficult, considering that he had only ever really experienced it in his armor, and being flesh-on-seat wasn't comfortable.

Rebecca glanced at her neighbor out of the corner of her eye. It was obvious that he had served for a long time; he responded almost robotically. _Maybe he has PTSD, _she thought. _Or maybe he just doesn't have any friends leftâ€¦_ She bit her lip. Rebecca hadn't been especially close to her mother's relatives on New Jerusalem but they were still family, and she had remembered them fondly. They had lost contact except for sending the traditional letters of "what we did this year" after her mother had died.

Rebecca decided to make sure, once she got home and settled back in, that John had a friend nearby in case he needed something. Judging by his look â€" he literally screamed professional soldier â€" he would need help adjusting.

"Can you cook?" she asked curiously.

John took a moment to think and then shook his head. "If it's not MRE, I haven't eaten it," he said lowly.

She stared. She'd tasted an MRE before; dry, disgusting packs of calories. The cheese alone would back anyone up for a week. "You have a tough stomach." John shrugged. "You'll have to learn to cook. You're in the middle of some of the richest farmland in North America! Okay, not really, but we make it work. Gotta love science."

John hadn't ever heard anyone prattle on like Rebecca except Marines when they were nervous. "Are you nervous, Rebecca?" he asked, concerned.

She looked at him weirdly. "Noooâ€|"

"Hm." He looked out the window again, not that there was anything to see.

"Anyway." She eyed him before grinning again. "What kind of domestic duties _can_ you do?"

John thought to himself. _I can kill with any weapon â€" or lack thereof â€" known to man and Covenant. I can repair and maintain MJOLNIR armor. I can strategize. I might be able to use a microwave._ Finally, he shook his head. "Probably nothing."

Her eyes got amusingly wide. "Do you know what detergent is?" she demanded.

"It's a compound added to a washing machine to clean stains from clothing," he responded, raising an eyebrow.

"Alright, Mr. Smarty Pants. Can you wash whites with colors?"

"Wash what with what?"

Rebecca smacked her forehead. "You're just like a teenager. Don't you remember anything before going into the military? Even the dumbest kid knows not to put metal in a microwave."

There went John's plans for the microwave. "Iâ€| don't. Amnesia," he lied. _More like I never did any of that._

"Oh." Her eyes widened again, though this time, in apology. "Sorry! Are you sure you'll be alright in civi life?" she asked, peering at him.

"I've always managed," he said softly, smiling a tiny bit. Rebecca amused him.

"Hmph. MREs indeed." John caught himself chuckling and shook his head slightly. "Well, you just let Aunt Becky take care of ya. Everyone'll be so excited. You're out first resident veteran, yanno. It's like a regular little clique, Yuray is. You'll love it."

"I'm looking more for solitude," he confessed.

"Handsome man like yourself? Pshaw." She grinned at him; John smiled a bit. He felt the scars running over his lips pulling. _Handsome? Noâ€| War-torn, battered, retired permanent soldierâ€|_ Suddenly, he felt a pang of understanding for his fellow Spartans who hadn't made it through augmentation. They had been trained for war and then their own training prevented them from serving, through death or disfigurement.

"Tell you what," Rebecca said, breaking him out of his thoughts. "You get settled in and call me when you run into the vacuum cleaner," she suggested, grinning and handing him a business card.

John blinked. He had no clue what a vacuum cleaner was, but he nodded and took the card. He glanced at it â€" it listed Rebecca as a "Localtarian Farmer and Animal Husband." The card itself was a cheery

green with bright blue lettering.

Rebecca finally seemed content to stop chattering, delving into the shopping magazine. John returned to his book but, after trying to read the same word three times, put it back in his bag and stared out the window. His thoughts drifted. With a start, he realized this was his third time being in the air and not being in danger of being shot out of it. He also recognized that he would have to leave that life behind.

John examined his skin in the reflection from the plastic that kept the freezing temperatures and low pressure from invading the cabin. He would probably tan, too; he and his Spartans were pale because they rarely saw true sunlight on any world they set foot on.

Cortana had insisted that he leave just after his awards ceremony and get settled in before returning for the Spartan memorial. There were actually going to be two "one just for those who really knew the Spartans, like Cortana and himself, and one for the public. The public one was actually a string of them, around Earth in all the major cities, where civilians and veterans alike could place flowers at the thirty-two nearly identical Spartan statues being erected around the world. The thirty-third would be placed when he died, John knew, and he wasn't allowed to look at the statue the committee had planned for him.

Those that represented the truly missing Spartans would have "MIA" instead of "KIA" but be relatively identical. Each was of a Spartan in their trademark MJOLNIR armor, in different poses. John had been part of the planning crew for that, and had made sure each statue reflected its persona. Kelly's was blurred slightly around the edges with water, bent forward like she was running with clear plastic supports to make it look like she was flying. She was one of the truly missing Spartans.

Before he knew it, the pilot was announcing their imminent landing and he felt the plane drop slowly. Rebecca shuffled her stuff into her lap and put the magazine back in the pocket before shooting him a smile. He nodded in response and looked out the window as the plane descended.

They touched down with a bounce, reminding John of the few times his Pelican actually made it to the surface of a planet. Otherwise, he ended up doing what had been dubbed "the Spartan jump" "that is, jumping from a Pelican as it burst into flames or tumbled into debris.

John stayed in his seat until the plane was mostly empty; Rebecca had the same idea and hummed tunelessly to herself as she waited. When the only people left on the plane were still trying to dislodge their carry-on items, Rebecca scooted into the aisle and paused as John carefully extracted himself from the seats.

"Have a wonderful day, sir," the attendant said as he left the plane. He nodded and followed Rebecca out into the terminal. This airport was much smaller than the Australian one; there were a few dozen people gathered, mostly waiting for family members from the plane that had just arrived.

"Do you have a car?" Rebecca asked; John glanced down at her. She was

looking up at him, probably making some sort of mental comment about how tall he was. She stood around 5'4", he guessed.

"I do," he responded quietly.

"Awesome. See ya later, alligator!"

John nearly bristled; "alligator" was a common derogatory term for the Sangheili, and since he had gotten to know Thel so well, he didn't like it when people called the Elites anything disrespectful. They had saved humanity, he knew; without them, Earth would have been destroyed by the Covenant loyalists.

However, he realized just as quickly that it was an old human saying and shook his head slightly. Thel had once expressed his distaste for human metaphors " which, John had pointed out, were nothing compared to the Prophets' speech. The Arbiter had chuckled in his way and agreed.

John found the rental car station and presented his papers there; the elderly man behind the ticket counter handed him a set of keys and described the car's location. He then thanked John for his service, and the Spartan wondered to himself if it was so obvious that he had served in the UNSC.

John found his car easily. It was a large one, the only thing Cortana could find that he could comfortably fit in with his augmented height. The 'Hog would arrive in a day or so, and until then, he would drive this beast. He placed his backpack in the seat next to him and started the engine. The car welcomed him and asked if he wanted to drive manually or have the car drive itself to the destination. He shook his head and engaged the manual override, pulling out of the garage and onto a busy highway.

4. A House to Call Mine

****Chapter 3: A House to Call Mine****

It took John about an hour and a half to find his new home. He drove in silence, observing the mountains he drove through. The airport had been in Monty, just to the north of Yuray, the town closest to his house. The resident population numbered around one thousand, including a small school for around three hundred children. The mountains towered over him as he wound through valleys; he drove alongside a red-tinted river, but this was not bloodstained. Iron-rich ore caused it, John knew " the mountains just south of Yuray were colored red by it. The trees were still green, the ones that weren't evergreens, but the nip of fall permeated the falling dusk.

He found the dirt road to the lake easily; it was marked with a clear sign. He wound up the dirt road and then stopped the car to open the beautifully-crafted gates that separated the lake community from the general population. He drove in, looking for the first driveway on the right. Aspen trees lined said driveway and a signpost declared it "483 Leynore Drive." He turned down the gravel road and wound through several aspen copses, getting nearly half a mile from the main road before coming to a large turn-around in front of the house.

John parked the car in front of the house. He had wanted a cabin, but Cortana reminded him that cabins were small " which he was not. So this was the result. It was a three-bed, two-bath house with two-car garage and boat ramp. The back porch was large enough to host a small party on, included pathways through the woods behind the house " of which he now owned seven acres " and a large garden in the back yard. It was all fenced in, as well, in case he wanted to get a dog " or something.

The house itself was two stories with large ship's prow bay windows overlooking the lake. Inside, John knew from schematics Cortana had found for him, the first floor was a kitchen and living room that could be converted into any sort of public space. There was also a bathroom on the first floor, an entryway to help insulate the house and keep guests from tracking mud in, and a large walk-in jacket closet. The second floor, accessed by a flight of stairs, had the master bedroom, an office, two guest rooms, and the final bathroom. The garage was a separate building, clearly added on after the house was built.

The house itself was built from synthetic wood that looked like the real thing. Very few houses were built from real wood anymore, since synthetic was so much cheaper and resilient. The steeply-angled roof was made of terracotta-like metal shingles. The front porch was fairly small and carved from stone; the steps leading up to it were metal. It should have looked out of place among all that wood, but John found that he liked the look. The garage was clearly plastic, a cheaper wood substitute, but looked sturdy enough to shelter the 'Hog from snow and rain.

The front driveway was gravel, which crunched under his feet as he walked up to the door. The seller had left the keys under the placemat, not that he thought the house needed to be locked anyway. It was a quiet community, he had explained to John when the Spartan emailed about the house for sale.

John unlocked the door and stepped inside. It smelled of warm wood; the floor was real cedar and released a pleasant scent into the air. John deposited his shoes by the door neatly and walked into his new home through the second entryway door.

It was partially furnished " the seller had bought a fully-furnished house and left most of the essential furniture behind. A faux-leather couch and two reclining chairs sat in front of the bay windows, overlooking the lake. There was enough room around the couch for a fairly large group of people to move around comfortably. A holographic projector could be lifted from a hidden compartment under the floors, John recalled. A rug covered the slight irregularity of the trap door to the projector. It was already connected to every broadcast station; all he would need to do was pay the monthly fee and he'd have access to all the news, reality shows, and cartoons he could possibly want.

The kitchen was immense; the person who had built the home had been a chef, the seller explained. There were two freezer/fridge combinations, both with French-style doors. The dish washer was obviously built to handle big jobs. The sinks were deep and there was a large drying rack nearby. However, the cupboards were empty " the seller had taken all of the dishes and silverware with him. The countertops were hard granite; the appliances were polished stainless

steel. All of it was lost on John, who didn't even know what half of the appliances were for; he did, however, recognize the large black microwave and coffee pot.

The bathroom was fairly large with speckled granite countertops and a raised sink bowl. The spigot that fed it was cleverly carved into the shape of a dragon spitting fire " except that it spat water. The hot and cold water knobs were the dragon's ears. The toilet didn't look like it would handle John's weight, though; it was dainty-looking porcelain. John gingerly pressed down on it with one hand. It didn't budge. Surprised, he sat down experimentally, and it held him. He grunted and looked in the shower.

He could stand up in this shower, he noticed; the shower "head" was actually the entire ceiling of the shower area. It would provide a waterfall-like experience, the seller had said, and the marbled glass that surrounded it insured privacy in case someone barged in unexpectedly. The corners of the shower room " it was plenty large enough for at least two people at once " were shelved, and the floor of the shower was patterned with dragon-shaped textures to provide better grip when the floor was wet. The towel racks were heated, warming the two black towels they supported. John looked for a button to turn off the feature to no avail.

Next, John explored the upstairs. The master bedroom was outfitted with a California king-sized bed, plenty big enough for John. The seller had joked that he could have a party on the bed alone, but John wasn't interested. There were two nightstands on either side of it, a matching set carved from cedar. Through the walk-in closet in the master bedroom was the office; it had many outlets in the walls, but nothing inside. John decided it might make a good weight room.

The bathroom up here was a replica of the one downstairs but even bigger with a real Jacuzzi-style tub in the corner. It was a little too luxurious for John, but he could probably remove it and replace it with something else. The washer and drier lived in a small room off the bathroom.

The two guest bedrooms were fairly simple; a queen-sized bed and table with matching chair in each. The one to the north boasted a small desk and rolling chair that John knew would collapse if he tried to use it. All of the bedrooms and closets were carpeted in plush green carpet; the walls and ceilings were paneled plasti-wood.

John set his pack on the master bed and walked out to the garage. The walls were filled with shelving, the floor was concrete, and it was grey. He smiled slightly; it almost looked like the inside of a ship. He felt comfortable in the cold building.

Next, John explored the back yard. The seller had left a grill large enough to roast three turkeys at once " not that John planned to do so. He didn't eat quite that much, and he'd never cooked before anyway. There were three distinct trails tramped down by years of use leading from the mowed and landscaped back yard into the woods beyond it. Said woods were mostly aspen and pine, but he caught a tall juniper tree about five hundred feet in, its bushy head sticking above the dense pines.

The garden was large, big enough to grow a fairly good-sized vegetable patch. He noticed the sprigs from this summer's mint sticking up forlornly. It was mid-fall, cool enough in the mountains that the first frosts would invade overnight soon.

Suddenly, John's pocket vibrated. He pulled out the dark cellphone and answered it quickly. "Masâ€| This is John," he corrected himself.

"Of course it is."

John grinned. "Hello, Cortana."

"Hello yourself. I'm watching you on satellite right now." John waved at the sky; Cortana chuckled softly. "How is your new home?"

"It's a house," John declared. "It's not home yet, Cortana."

"Better than an ONI desk, though, right?"

"Yes, Cortana," John sighed.

"Did you meet Rebecca?"

John blinked. "How did you know that?"

"I did some looking around in the files of everyone on board and bumped her to first class," Cortana admitted after a pause. "She seemed like a good first person for you to meet. And her file says she's outgoing, so I hoped she would start the conversation. Since I know you wouldn't have."

"You're messing with destiny, Cortana," John warned, grinning.

"What else have you and I ever done?" the AI retorted, a smile in her voice. John sighed slightly at the reminder; Cortana must have heard because her voice was soft when she spoke again. "I'll miss working with you, Chief. The whole UNSC will miss you."

"Except the Helljumpers," he pointed out.

"Except them," Cortana agreed. "How does it feel to be anonymous?"

"I'm not," he said bluntly. "I'm 6'10", weigh 290 pounds â€" my driver's license is incorrect, by the way â€" and I look like someone took a meat grinder to me. People see me and thank me for serving. Someone bright is going to put "tall, scarred, and strong" and "Spartan" together, you know."

"You're just being pessimistic," she told him. "The chances of that happening are literally one in a million. Give or take a few percent because humans are so unpredictable."

"Odds were worse to find the Halos," John responded.

"Be optimistic!"

"Yes, ma'am." John smiled; Cortana always put him in a good mood.

"Seriously, John. I'm worried about you. You have a chance to make a new life for yourself. Sure, forty years after you were born, but you can do it. Just don't think of it as a mission; there are many ways to win in life."

"I do always win," John admitted, gazing at his house with almost a glare. "Oh, that reminds me. What does "don't wash colors with whites" mean?"

Cortana processed that for almost a full second, an impressive stall considering her processing power. "Johnâ€¦ You're hopeless."

"I know. But just tell me."

"For clothing. Don't wash bright white clothes with dark colored clothes. The colors will bleed."

"Well, that won't be a problem, considering I have three pairs of clothing with me, including my dress uniform which is going into a deep, dark corner of the closet."

"Expecting someone to come poking around?" she asked curiously.

"I need to call in a cleaning crew," he answered.

"Big bad Spartan is afraid of a little dust?"

"More like big bad Spartan doesn't have a broom."

"Poor baby."

"Thank you, Cortana," John said dryly. Cortana laughed.

"I see you managed to pull some money from the bank. Your first mission accomplished."

John sighed. "One of a thousand many. How much do I have in there anyway?"

He could imagine her palming her face as she answered. "John, you need to learn some domestic chores. Keeping track of your money is one of those things."

"A number, please?"

"You bought the house for half a million. You got a bonus at the end, and you were paid more than a regular MCPO, so just over 3 million left."

John was silent for a moment, comparing that to the price of gum from the airport stands. "That's a lot, isn't it?"

Cortana huffed. "Yes, John, that's a lot. You could live very comfortably for the rest of your life without a job and have money left over. I suggest finding something to do with yourself, though."

"Thanks, Cortana. First things first, though; I need to stock this house."

"I bet you can't even cook."

John was silent for a moment. When he spoke again, Cortana realized that she might be watching her friend fade already. "I can't do _anything_, Cortana. I can coordinate battles, I can kill in my _sleep_, I can do enough math to give you a run for your money in Slipspace jump calculationsâ€¦ But I don't even know what a vacuum is. The domestic type, I mean." He just sounded miserable, something she had never heard from him before. For a moment, Cortana searched her memory banks for any pertinent information she could give but came up blank.

"You'll learn," she said encouragingly. "The Navy should definitely write a book about getting back to domestic life."

"Most veterans had a domestic life before the military," John pointed out shrewdly. "I didn't."

"Find some Cooking for Dummies," she suggested.

"Thanks, Cortana." John sighed again, looking up. "I'm going to head back to the city for the stuff I need. I'll talk to you later."

"Call Rebecca," she suggested. "And take care of yourself. Don't hesitate to call if you need anything. Even just a friendly shoulder."

John terminated the call and squared his shoulders. It was time for his first mission â€" he had to find things to stock the house. But what, he didn't have a clue. John sighed, frazzled already.

The card was sitting on the kitchen table, John remembered. He walked inside slowly, still enjoying the scent of cedar that washed over him as he opened the door, and picked it up, reading the number. John quickly dialed it and leaned against the counter.

"Hello!" Rebecca sounded like she was in a great mood.

"Rebecca, this is John."

"Oh! John! How's things?"

"Good." John was unsure how to phrase his next question, but Cortana had chosen wisely when she messed with the flight manifest.

"You sound lost," Rebecca told him sternly. "Not 'good'. What do you need help with?"

John sighed slightly. "I have no idea how to get this house up to livable condition," he admitted finally.

"Years of bunks will do that to you," she said warmly. "I'll be over in a jiffy. Do you mind if I bring Chichi?"

"Not at all," John answered.

"Okay! See you in a few!" She hung up before he could answer. John scowled slightly; not many people were faster than he was at

anything.

Fifteen minutes later, John heard a deep "woof" outside and a knock at the door. He hadn't moved from his position but straightened now to pull open the door. "Hello," he said courteously. Rebecca came in when he stepped back; the big black dog followed her like it owned the place. "Chichi." John nodded to the dog in greeting; Chichi wagged her tail.

"She's friendly, you can pet her," Rebecca called. She was already rooting through the kitchen. "The old man didn't leave you anything, did he?" she huffed to herself. John recognized a rhetorical question and didn't answer, crouching instead to bring himself face-to-face with the dog and offer his hand for her to sniff. She did so delicately and then moved forward enough to sniff his face.

John ruffled her fur gently; it was silky and smooth with a dense undercoat. Chichi snuffled his face and then wagged her entire rump happily, bumping into him as John scratched the base of her tail.

"Mind if I poke around?" Rebecca called belatedly, already halfway up the stairs.

"Help yourself," John answered, standing. Chichi barked and raced across the wooden floor to the stairs to follow her owner upstairs. Rebecca was back in less than ten minutes.

"You need everything," she told him, pursing her lips. She pulled a pen and notepad from her pocket, flipped to a clean page, and started writing. "Vacuum, broom, dustpan, mop, window cleaner, toilet cleaner, rags, paper towels, detergent, shampoo, condition, soap, sheets, pillows, pillow cases, four or five lamps, a desk, a sturdy office chair, dining room table and chairs â€" if you plan to have company, I guess â€" cutlery, utensils, various cooking supplies, pots, pans, dishes, cups or glasses, mugs food, drinks, lawn chairs, a couple of wall clocks, a dresser, hangers, a laptop â€" do you have one?" John didn't get a chance to answer. "Extension cords, surge protectorâ€" How much stuff did you bring with you?"

"Just that backpack."

She goggled it for a moment and scowled at John. "Clothing, then. Jacket, gloves or mittens, snow pants, boots, hiking boots, hatâ€" What about the yard equipment?"

"Nothing was left," John answered.

"Lawn mower should hold you for now. Oh, shovels! You'll need a couple of good, sturdy snow shovels. Or a plow." She chuckled and handed the list to John. "How's that?"

"It'sâ€" A long list," John answered carefully. "Is it all necessary?"

"Are you pressed for money? You can get most of it in thrift stores, if so, but yes, it's all necessary."

John shook his head. "I have plenty of that." Cortana had drilled that into him. "I'm used to metal ships, short showers, and

already-made food. I just don't know what to do with most of these things," he explained, feeling foolish.

"Oh, I'll come with you!" she offered with a grin. "I saw your car outside â€" you should have enough space for everything, including me. Chichi wouldn't fit, though." She grinned down at the dog. "If you want company, that is," she said quickly, looking at him for confirmation.

"I would appreciate your help," he told her gratefully.

"Perfect! Let's go! I'll leave Chichi in the back yard, okay?"

John nodded and waited while Chichi bounded outside through the thick wooden door before leading the way to the car. He unlocked it and opened Rebecca's door for her; she grinned, made a comment about chivalry, and climbed in. John slid into the driver's seat and started the engine.

Rebecca chattered constantly during the drive, all hour and a half of it. John learned a lot about her; her favorite color was black, her favorite animal was the dragon, and she loved riding horses. She was glad to have something to do between taking care of her small farm. She grew lettuce, carrots, cabbage, peas, and onions and raised pigs, goats, and horses. Her horse breeding program wasn't the best, but she loved all of her horses; she had two stallions, Lover Boy and Rose Red, and a mare, Miss Valentine. She mainly bred heavy Draft horses like the Shire.

"You're an amazing listener," she told him half-way into the one-sided conversation. John shrugged slightly and this prompted a flood of how she was a much better talker than listener, which led to more stories of her childhood school days when she got in trouble for talking too much. This led to other stories, which ate up the time.

It was nice, John realized, to drive somewhere without the danger of being blown up by a Covenant ship just over the horizon. It was also nice to drive somewhere with a person who was so talkative; even the most talkative Spartan couldn't hold a candle to Rebecca. Regular soldiers tended to shut up around the Spartans, too, in awe or disgust. Listening to stories that had nothing to do with the war was pleasant and calming.

"Take this right," Rebecca ordered; John moved the car over obligingly and turned into a giant super-store. "Park near the entrance; we're going to have a _lot_ of stuff." He did so quickly, finding it difficult to stay within certain lines. His driving experience had mostly been screeching to a halt anywhere and jumping from the vehicle just as it blew up â€" or not even stopping in the same scenario.

He managed it, though, and they got out without issue. John locked the car and followed Rebecca inside, handing her the list obediently. "Alright, let's start with the big stuff and then we can come back for the smaller stuff." She chewed on the tip of her pen. "Grab a cart," she ordered, pushing a cart along herself. John carefully pulled one from the line and followed, making sure not to grip the guide bar too hard and leave dents.

"Okay, first stop, appliances!" They walked to the left side of the store where John was introduced to the vacuum, broom, dustpan, and mop. They picked up cleaners â€" when asked, John didn't have a preference to smell, so Rebecca chose matching lavender scents of everything, to complement the cedar, she claimed.

They filled the two carts with appliances and cleaning supplies and headed for the check-out lines. John helped the clerk lift the heavy items as he scanned them, and two eager young men working there offered to help take everything to the car. John paid for his purchases and the four managed to empty the first load into the car, organizing everything so it filled up about three quarters of the available space.

Rebecca led them back in for cooking ware, clothing, and odds and ends she remembered after seeing them. They came back out with another pair of helpers and, with a quick additional buy of bungee cords, strapped everything into place.

"Perfect," Rebecca beamed. "Now let's go get something to eat. My treat."

John drove them obligingly to Rebecca's favorite restaurant â€" a Chinese buffet place â€" but refused to let her pay, swiping the bill before the woman had even registered it on the table. Rebecca had pouted at him, tell him that denying a woman anything was rude, but he was stead-fast and paid for lunch. In "punishment," Rebecca was silent for all of thirty seconds on the way back to John's car.

"My silent treatment usually works better than that," she told him when those thirty seconds were up. Then she began chattering again, and this time, John listened carefully. She talked about all the cooking she did â€" it was a hobby, she explained â€" and how to do various house chores. Finally, they got to John's house and John felt much more prepared for what lay ahead.

Rebecca ran inside to "powder her nose" â€" John wasn't sure what to make of that, since he had no powder that he knew of, other than the bleach in the car â€" as John began unloading. He carried everything inside easily and made sure Chichi was still in the back yard. Rebecca emerged from the bathroom just as he started putting the perishable food into the fridge.

"You're fast," she told him, grinning. They set to work and quickly found everything a place. They filled two garbage bags with cardboard and plastic wrappings, which John carried to the larger trashcan at the end of his driveway that Rebecca told him was for trash-pick-up people. Another thing he would have to manage, John knew.

"Okay, so, you should be fully prepared," she said, grinning. "I'll let you put away your own clothes and stuff. Need anything else?"

"No, thank you, Rebecca." John smiled slightly; she grinned and let herself â€" and Chichi â€" out with a promise to check back in tomorrow. John looked around, feeling the space become much more his than it had been before.

Right on cue, Cortana called again. John answered with a smile in his voice. "I see Rebecca left you with a lot of good stuff," she said in

way of greeting.

"I don't think I'll need anything until I run out of food," he remarked, chuckling.

"You sound happy," she told him.

John paused and nodded. "I am," he replied, smiling. "This mission just became a whole lot easier."

"You never liked easy."

"I do when it means I know what I'm doing," John pointed out.

"Trueâ€¦ Now, you probably need a shower."

"Yes, Mother."

Cortana processed his joke for a millisecond, a lifetime to her. John rarely joked; his wit was dry, and usually involved commentary on a bad situation he was in, like the Flood. "She's a good influence on you," Cortana noted.

John's eyes narrowed slightly, but he was still grinning as he answered. "Are you saying I'm a bad influence?"

"On most people? Yes."

"That includes you," he reminded her.

"Most definitely me. Now, shower. I need to get back toâ€¦ Well, I need to get back to work. Classified, you know."

John knew, but it still made him uncomfortable. He used to be privy to almost everything, being one of the "classified" bits of data himself. "Be well, Cortana."

"And you, John. In the shower." She hung up as John smirked slightly and went, with his new shampoo, conditioner, and soap, to obey orders.

5. Recon

****Chapter 4 â€" Recon ****

John walked silently through the forest. He had already surprised a doe and a yearling buck once, being so quiet, but they had caught his scent just as he saw them and fled. The aspens above were just starting to turn yellow, painting the blue sky into a patchwork quilt of yellows and blues. The pines and junipers added the random splash of green to the tapestry.

He had moved in nearly a week ago; today was his time to familiarize himself with his new property and then scout the nearby town for a grocery store â€" mostly for the little things â€" and to learn the layout of his surroundings. During the past few days, he had cleaned the house from top to bottom, which had taken much longer than he had anticipated, and used his new mower to tame the grass in the

backyard. With Cortana's help, he had also managed to arrange for trash pickup every Monday morning, satellite TV â€" though he hadn't watched any yet, and propane disposal. The sewage company hadn't called back yet about the sewage tank in his front yard, hidden under a small mound of pretty rocks.

John had also organized the gardens on both sides of the house, preparing them for the winter and choosing, with Rebecca's help, the plants that would go in them come spring. With these chores done, it was finally time to explore his surroundings. He had a few topographic maps downloaded onto his laptop already, courtesy of Cortana â€" who had also rewritten a few lines of code in his laptop to upgrade the security so they could share emails and information that was technically classified.

John found the edges of his property easily â€" it was fenced in with simple wire and wood fencing. The lake behind the house was fed by a multitude of small streams, all of which he marked mentally. He then went back to the house, showered, and put on clean clothing. After conferring with a woman in the clothing department, Rebecca had declared that his entire wardrobe would be greys, blacks, greens, and blues â€" so he didn't have to worry about not matching, she explained. They had proceeded to buy several sets of jeans, T-shirts, khakis, and a few dress shirts â€" just in case. He had chosen his own underwear and socks.

He put on a soft green cotton T-shirt â€" even in the largest size it was form-fitting, he would have to order special clothing if he wanted anything loose, but having spent so much of his life in skin-tight MJOLNIR made him more comfortable in form-fitting clothing. Not to mention, the sales representative had remarked with a grin, it displayed his muscles beautifully.

John quickly pulled on a pair of jeans, feeling the denim with his fingers. It was his first time in jeans, but he liked them. He hurried downstairs and grabbed the keys to his rental car â€" the 'Hog was scheduled to arrive soon, he remembered, having been delayed due to a processing error â€" and headed out, not locking the door behind him. He had told Rebecca to help herself to his house if she needed something from it, so he left it unlocked. Anything of his Spartan life was locked in a safe he had purchased on his big trip to Monty with Rebecca.

John got in the car and backed out of the driveway. He turned around and headed towards the town, Yuray, slowly, mostly watching the scenery. Fall gripped the place overnight, it had seemed â€" there were a few patches of green trees, but mostly those were evergreen pines. The chill at night was a welcome sensation when John woke in the middle of the night.

He pulled carefully onto the highway â€" the turn was constructed so that it was difficult to see oncoming traffic when pulling out â€" and drove south. He got into town really quickly and parked at the north end, near a hot-springs-fed pool. It was nearly noon, when the pool opened, and John realized he didn't have a swim suit. He might enjoy a pool, John thought. He'd gone swimming in lakes before, and had showers, but being a warm pool would be somethingâ€¦ He searched for a word. Civilian came to mind, and he pushed away the thought. Besides, a swimsuit would expose just how extensive his scarring was.

A garage was just south of the pool; he walked on the west side of the road into town. Outside of the pool was a thick field of grass with lines marked out for soccer, football, and baseball. There were cracked concrete basketball courts and a pair of old tennis courts to the north. A river ran on the western side of the pool and park.

John hit main street to find it mostly empty. Being mid-fall, he supposed most children were in school, and most summer residents had already moved to warmer temperatures. There was a minor bite to the air, but John enjoyed it.

He walked past shops and restaurants and found what he was looking for just east of main street, three blocks into the town. The grocery store was simply called "Yur-Ay Grocery" and was open for business. John didn't need anything but marked the location in his mind, along with a nice-looking restaurant. He found the school and watched for a moment as fourth-graders played on the playground, screaming in happiness. It was on such a playground that Dr. Halsey had found him, he remembered. These children would grow up without the threat of the Covenant glassing their planet, for which he was glad.

He moved away, heading up and down the side streets. He found a haircutters salon "he did plan to keep his hair short and could cut his own hair, but figured he may as well pay to have it professionally done" and a few miscellaneous stores. All of the buildings were old, at least forty or fifty years out of date. They were also homogenous; squat brick or metal-sided buildings with sturdy, slanted roofs. The entire town was built to withstand major snowfall.

"Hello, there!" John turned slightly to see an elderly gentleman hailing him. He dipped his head respectfully.

"Hello, sir."

The old man chuckled, his pale blue eyes twinkling beneath a wispy head of stark white hair. He was probably in his eighties, John decided. "Are ya visitin'?" The man looked up sharply, craning his neck back. His back was stooped, making him stand around 5'4", just like Rebecca. He was so thin that John immediately compared him to a stick. An easily breakable stick, more like a twig.

"No, sir. I just moved in."

"Oh, excellent. Where do you live?"

"On Lake Leynore, sir. 483 Leynore Drive."

"Ah, Old Man Hubbard's place!"

"I don't know of any Mr. Hubbard, sir. I bought it from a Mr. Litol."

"His nickname," the elderly man explained with a grin. "I'm Robert, but everyone calls me Grandpa."

John offered his hand. "I'm John," he said. The gentleman shook his hand enthusiastically, his hand tiny and cold inside John's.

"Quite a grip you've got there, son. Were you in the war?"

"Yes, sir," John answered with a small nod. He hadn't even been trying to hold onto Robert's hand; it was just too delicate-looking.

"Good on you. I'd've signed up but they didn't want my ancient ass." The man chuckled. "You look too young to be so scarred up, boy." John found himself the object of the man's squinting scrutiny. "What are you, thirty five?"

"Over forty, sir, though Slipspace and time dilation have slowed down my aging slightly."

"Hmph. That's what you get, tearing holes in space." He peered at John again. "Still, you're big for a Marine. What were you?"

"I was Navy, sir. Special forces."

"Didja serve with those Spartan folk?"

John blinked and nodded slightly. "Yes, sir."

"They were good folk," the man said, eyes going misty. "One of 'em saved my granddaughter." He waved towards the school. "She was visitin' her mom on Victoria. Betty â€" her name's Bettunia, her late father's sense of humor there, but we call her Betty - said two Spartans saved her. John and Kelly, she said they were called. I told her she was very lucky. She idolizes them, yanno. All the kids do."

"Yes, sir," John whispered. He remembered the fourteen children he had rescued from Victoria with Kelly; the eldest, Jane, had been around thirteen, the youngest merely two or three, not counting the dead baby they had left behind.

"Sorry, lad. I didn't mean to bring up memories." The man smiled kindly; John nodded slightly.

"I was on Victoria, sir," John explained quietly. "It was bad. I don't know how many they managed to evacuate."

"Would've been a hell of a lot less without those Spartans. It's a shame, what with them all missing or dead, save that one. John. Him as saved my little Betty. Didja hear he's left the UNSC to live anonymously?"

John nodded. "I heard that, sir."

"He deserves it. I hope he gets it." Robert's eyes twinkled knowingly at John, who realized this elderly gentleman who looked too frail to withstand a strong wind had figured out his identity. The realization made John slightly nervous, but Robert's eyes were kind as he smiled, waved, and wandered up to the school. John watched him go, sighing quietly. He was glad at least one of those fourteen children was having a normal life.

With heavy thoughts back on his mind, John walked back to his car and drove back to the house, thinking. Once there, he noticed the 'Hog in

the driveway and a teenager leaning against it. The young man turned when John pulled up, flashed him a smile, and opened the driver door.

"Afternoon, sir! Here's your car. And may I say, sir, it was a beast to drive." John nodded and the youth handed him a ticket. "That's my company's contact information in case you have any concerns or questions. I'll take this back the rental company for you, sir. Have a good day!" The teenager was in the car and out of the driveway quickly. John patted the 'Hog's hood on his way inside.

In the entryway, John took off his walking shoes and lined them up neatly next to his brand-new snow boots and hiking boots. He then meandered inside, fixed himself a TV dinner " just pop it in the microwave, Rebecca had instructed him before leaving yesterday- for a late lunch, and sat on the couch gingerly. It held up under his weight, though, so he pulled out the universal remote from the arm of the couch and played with the buttons for a moment before calling the projector out of the floor and turning it on to the news out of boredom.

"In breaking news, the Elite Arbiter, known as Thel 'Vadam, has joined the table of the Elite-Human treaty talks, just recently back from his visit to Sanghelios. Known mostly for his association with the last known Spartan, Master Chief Spartan-117, 'Vadam is now on a road to peace, he says. Kurt is on-station at the talks." The camera switched suddenly to show a crowd chanting outside a dark grey building. A man in a thin coat smiled at the camera and gestured behind him.

"Thanks, Jenny. As you can see, there are people here today protesting the Elite-Human Alliance. Fleet Admiral Terrence Hood, several human officials, and many CEOs of large corporations whose investments were lost on glassed worlds are inside speaking to the Arbiter and the Imperial Commander of the Elite, known as Xylin. Currently, talks are progressing over what kind of colonization will be in the future for humanity, so many of the terra-formed planets now uninhabitable thanks to the former Covenant." Suddenly, the doors opened and the crowd noisily yelled at the emerging humans and Sangheili.

"Here they come now. For those of you who don't know, the shorter one on the right is the Arbiter. Fleet Admiral Hood is currently shaking his hand. It looks like there has been some sort of agreement. Let's see what they will tell us."

The humans and Elites headed for the crowd. Two human and two Elite guards pushed the crowd back, the Elites being more gentle but also cautious. "Sirs, has there been a decision?" Kurt the newsman demanded, sticking a hand-held microphone into Hood's face.

"There has been. With the cooperation of Arbiter Thel 'Vadam and Supreme Commander Xylin, humanity will be rebuilding its decimated fleet, integrating Covenant technologies to improve them."

Kurt turned to Thel, who bent his neck gracefully to bring his eyes on level with the human's. "And you, sir, do you support this decision?"

It was difficult for the Elites to speak English, John knew, and Thel

was one of the best at it. "Yes, I do. We regret the destruction we caused under the command of the faithless Prophets." There was a definite growl in his words. "We would see humanity restored to its previous prowess, though we know it will take many generations."

"What about your species?" Kurt pressed. "Many Elites died in the war, too."

"We have already started rebuilding our fleet and population," Thel answered. "You lost at least four ships to our one, so your need is greater though you are more numerous."

"What about trade agreements? Will Sanghelios provide raw materials?"

"Unfortunately, we cannot supply all the necessary materials this undertaking will require. We are currently discussing trade agreements and collaborating with human scientists to mine the necessary materials more efficiently." Thel clacked his lower jaws gently together. "Many worlds that we know to be rich in ore have been burned, or glassed, as you say. Others are in the hands of Covenant Loyalists."

"What will be done about the Brutes?" a man in the crowd demanded.

"The Jiralhanae have agreed to peace talks," Thel said calmly, turning to the man. "I will accompany a mixed crew of human and Sangheili leaders to discuss the future of the Covenant Separatists and Loyalists."

"What about the billions you murdered, squid-head?" a furious woman screamed from nearby. The camera turned around to find her; she was a tiny woman, clutching a picture of a Marine to her chest. "You killed my husband!"

"The war between us is over," Thel said. "I regret the loss of so many valuable humans, and mourn their passing as I do one of my own."

Kurt tried desperately to bring the crowd under control, asking loudly, "Is it true you saved the last known Spartan from a ship?"

Thel turned back to Kurt and dipped his head gracefully. "My ship and crew found the Forward Unto Dawn and revived the Demon â€" that is what we have named him in our tongue, though it translates poorly into yours â€" from the Icy Sleep. We returned him to Earth and I have not seen him since, though I know he has retired from service."

"He wants to live a civilian life in anonymity," Kurt said. "What are your thoughts?"

Thel smiled, though few would correctly call the slightly widening of his mandibles a smile. "I think he has deserved it. Even while we were enemies, I have always respected the Demon and his army."

The talk quickly turned to treaty logistics with the crowd muttering

in the background, but John was thinking. He remembered waking up with Sangheili looking over him; he had nearly decapitated them in his groggy state of mind. Two Elites had held him off until he managed to clear his head, with the help of Cortana.

Thel had explained what had happened since he had gone missing, with the war ended and the humans and Sangheili working for peace, mostly. He had also delivered the sad news that none of his missing Spartans had been recovered.

John fell into a light doze as the TV news continued to play, moving from topic to topic. He slept poorly in the large master bedroom and bed, always tossing and turning on the too-comfortable mattress, waiting for the sound of an alarm or a summons to the bridge to rouse him from his sleep instantly. It was also unnerving to sleep without the constant noise of a ship in space around him.

He woke again sometime around dusk and watched the sun set over the lake. The news was playing advertisements for anti-gravity belts, inspired by the Covenant's Prophets, to "shed those wearying pounds" and "float head and shoulders above your friends." John clicked the TV off and stood, straightening his frame carefully as he stretched.

John went upstairs and started up his laptop, looking through the internet for some sort of hobby. Cooking sounded interesting, but he doubted he would know what to do with the most basic recipe. He read a manual on carpentry, then perused hobby sites for collectors of different things, like art or dragon statues or mid-twentieth-century Coca Cola products.

"If you wanted something to do, all you had to do is ask." Cortana's voice came over the laptop's speakers. John scowled, muting the speakers. It didn't stop her; she opened a chat box on his screen and overlaid it on his browser. "John, what's wrong?" she asked.

"I am trying to do something here," he typed back rapidly. "Please stop hijacking my laptop."

"John, you don't look so good." The web cam in the top of the laptop's screen lit up; John scowled at it, too. Traitorous laptop.

"I feel fine," he retorted, arranging a small piece of micro-cloth over the camera to block the view.

"Then why are you so angry?"

"I'm not."

He could imagine her sigh at his stubbornness. "You can't hide it from me, John. I know you better than that. Come on, out with it. Or I'll call Rebecca and tell her you need her help."

"You wouldn't dareâ€¦"

"I have already accessed her file."

"Fine." John scowled impressively again. "I feel so useless, Cortana. The only time I never had something to do was in Slipspace, and I was

usually in cryo during that time."

"Ah, so that's it. You can't just sit and watch TV. You need to find something to do."

"Which is what I was doing before you interrupted."

"Say no more. Sorry, John. I just worry about you. You and I, we aren't meant to be static."

John didn't reply and Cortana removed the chat box from his screen. He returned to his surfing, idly wondering if he should get a job. That would certainly help with the copious free time he was enduring, but he wasn't sure what he was qualified for.

He typed in "bodyguard" into the search bar. A few million sites popped up, and he refined the search with "job" and "qualifications" to narrow them down. A rather helpful site popped up â€" "What Can Veterans Do?"

He clicked it and found a professional â€" obviously military â€" site that listed possible jobs that took into account different types of training from desk staff to bodyguard. He clicked the bodyguard link and read through the details. It sounded like something he would be excellent at â€" in fact, probably too good. He would stick out like a sore thumb and someone would put two and two together.

Sighing, John went back to the list and browsed it. None of the options sounded appealing, and he didn't actually have the skills necessary to answer phones, keep financial records, or enter data â€" not to mention he wasn't exactly the trainer type. Hood had offered him a job as a recruit trainer hesitantly, but with the war over, the pressure to sign up to the UNSC was lessened and the trainers were being laid off already. Besides, trainees would probably try to impress the former Spartan, which often led to injuries.

With a frustrated growl, he shut the laptop and stood, deciding to go for a jog. When in doubt, Spartans acted, and John couldn't act on anything but his instincts that he needed to get out of this suffocating house. Which was actually ironic, considering how much time he spent in more claustrophobic environments. He didn't like open spaces, but he wanted one right then.

John walked out the door and glanced left and right at the end of the driveway. He knew what lay one way; the highway and Yuray. The other way, though, was a mystery. He decided to jog that way.

The feeling of his feet hitting the ground was comforting. "Pounding dirt" was what he was made to do, in military slang; he wasn't meant to sit idly at a laptop, or sleep the day away.

John slowly increased his speed, but he still felt slow. He was probably only running at twenty miles per hour, at least ten miles per hour below his normal in MJOLNIR armor. The Spartan sighed. He would have to get used to it.

He passed a couple of houses, including one he suspected belonged to Rebecca after noticing the fenced pastures and large greenhouse behind the small house. He moved on, though, not willing to drop by

unannounced.

John continued to run, ignoring the slight pain in his chest as his breathing deepened. The road slowly turned from packed dirt to loose dirt and he had to slow down a hair to dodge ankle-breaking rocks and potholes. The road continued upwards, though, and John could feel his legs starting to burn with the workout. It felt good; the rush of adrenaline that filled him as he ran around a corner made him feel alive again.

On a whim, John ducked, imagining a Covenant plasma turret bombarding his position. The forest and soothing sounds of the animals within it faded, replaced by the static of his comm unit as a Marine screamed for back up just ahead. The Covenant turret blasted a hole in the cement just in front of the barricade, behind which a dozen Marines huddled, two or three injured.

John didn't break stride as he pounded up to their position and came to a sudden stop, crouching before them. He demanded a report; the leader responded shakily that they were pinned by the turret and a slew of Needler-bearing Grunts led by two Elites. They didn't know what color armor said Elites wore.

He glanced at the wounded men, ordered the Marines to patch them up and prepare for evac, and then jumped over the barricade. He ran straight at the turret, ignoring the Needlers as they pinged off his armor and shattered, dropping his shields slightly. He did dodge the turret's plasma ball as it fired upon him, the Grunt in the seat chattering.

Then he was among them and it was a massacre. He shot a few, but mostly just crushed skulls and chests with punches and the butt of his rifle. He took out the turret first, smashing the gunner into a methane-leaking pulp. Then John turned to the Elites as they roared and charged; he met one head-on, gripping the Elite's wrist that held an energy sword and using his other hand to punch the shields. They dropped slowly; the Elite struggled, throwing himself and John around the battlefield. The second Elite stayed back; their honor code demanded one-on-one battles with equal foes, something that had saved John's life before and was doing so now. He could afford to ignore that Elite for now.

Suddenly, John's fist met armor, denting it; he had broken through the shields. The Elite warbled and brought his other hand up, smashing it down on John's head. The Spartan's shields held, but just barely; John punched again and the Elite groaned, trying to tug its energy sword free again and punching the Spartan again. John's shields died and he felt the bruising impact.

Once more, he thought to himself, drawing back his fist and punching through the Elite this time. Purple blood exploded around his armor and entrails hung from his arm and the soon-to-be-lifeless Elite slid to the ground.

With an explosive roar, the second Elite attacked. John grabbed the first Elite's energy sword, snapping it to life and raising it to meet the oncoming attacker. They sparred with the energy swords, moving through the battlefield. They pair moved in a deadly dance too fast for the human eye to follow, if it wasn't Spartan.

The Elite warbled and struck; John saw his opportunity and sacrificed defense for offense. That was what Spartans did, he thought to himself as he jabbed forward. The Elite's energy sword sunk into his thigh, shearing through the armor neatly, but it jerked to a stop as John's energy sword pierced the Elite's first heart. They had two, but it was a fatal blow; the Elite groaned and dropped, almost in slow motion. John stepped back, ignoring the pain from his thigh.

The Marines moved up; one of them held a bar of biofoam. John waved him off and activated his suit's biofoam injectors. The armor would be weak there, and he would have to remember that, but for now, he was fine.

"Move out," he ordered the Marines.

"Sir, yes, sir!" they barked, moving into the block ahead. John strapped the energy sword to his belt, knowing it could come in handy, and moved with them.

The scene faded and John realized he was standing still, not jogging after the Marines anymore. In fact, as his hand dipped to feel his thigh, he noticed that he had been standing there for long enough for his breathing to have slowed.

He had had flashbacks before, but never so long or so strong. His thigh ached from the blow and he unconsciously ran his hand over the scar he knew was there. That injury had been one of the worst he'd received; he had ignored it during the battle and, when he got back on board, a medic pointed out that the biofoam had ruptured, covering his leg in red blood. His armor was no longer green on that side.

John had stayed conscious on the short trip to the medical bay where they knocked him out and started replacing the blood he had lost, stitching up the wound and checking for broken bones.

"You're too damn tough," the doctor had scolded him when he was awakened again. "If you're hurt, you need to get evacuated."

John had ignored his orders and was brought back the next time on a stretcher, having passed out from blood loss again. The Marines who had found him " he had been working alone at the time, moving from group to group, a one-man backup squad " had been smart enough to call for a Pelican with towing capability, and John was subsequently hauled into the medical bay on a lift usually used to move broken Warthogs around. He had flatlined once, to the terror of the doctors, but returned on his own.

John had lost track of the number of times he had woken up in the medical wing of a ship, or on the battlefield after losing consciousness. He had physically died a few times, but each time, someone " usually himself " was able to restart his heart.

John shook his head, clearing it of the memories, and turned around, headed back. It was dark, but he could see easily. The reflected light from a full moon outlined the road and made the aspen trees glow ghostly white. He jogged slowly, stretching muscles that had stiffened during his stop.

When he got back to his house, he found it dark, empty â€" much like a dead planet. He flipped on a couple of lights, drank a glass of water, and went upstairs. He left the lights on downstairs as he showered and then fell asleep restlessly on the too-big bed.

His last thought was amusement at the fact that anything could be too big for a Spartan. Then he was out, and slept fitfully.

6. Rebecca's Farm

I apologize for the delay â€" my computer (and therefore files of this story) was killed by a Dell technician who was supposed to fix it. I finally got it back, though! So here's an update to celebrate!

Chapter 5 â€" Rebecca's Farm

Rebecca groaned to herself as she slowly woke up. She was a morning person, but today sounded like a really good day to sleep in. Chichi, though, had other ideas; as soon as she moved, the big love-sponge was up on the bed, trying to lick her awake.

"Off, Chichi, down!" she cried, giggling. "Good girl." The dog woofed quietly and wagged her bushy tail as Rebecca dragged herself from the bed and into the shower. Once under the hot water, she woke up completely and emerged smiling and bushy-headed from the bathroom.

She pulled on a pair of jeans and a light long-sleeve shirt. Today was Thursday, a day she always weeded her carefully-tended garden thoroughly. Rebecca first needed breakfast, though, and Chichi wanted food, too.

Rebecca decided to do an easy morning and got cereal and milk from her cabinet. She put down a bowl with kibbles for Chichi, who dug in with a bark of thanks, and sat at the breakfast bar, munching her own granola. They finished quickly, Rebecca washed both dishes and set them to dry, and Chichi led the way to the shed just outside. She wagged her entire body as Rebecca put on her gardening gloves; Chichi knew that meant it was gardening day, something she was very good at.

"Come on, Chichi, let's feed everyone!" Rebecca and Chichi ran to the food storage barn together. The three horses and goats crowded at the near edges of their pastures. The pigs squealed from their barn. Chichi willingly let Rebecca hook her up to a sled; Rebecca loaded it with bags of grain and Chichi obligingly pulled them to the pastures. Rebecca tossed a bale of hay in for the horses, put out three buckets of grain â€" a little morning treat â€" and then fed the goats some nutrient-rich fodder. She milked them and preferred an organic approach to feeding them, but the grass simply wasn't enough to sustain even those hardy creatures.

Next, she and Chichi dragged a bag of pig feed to the pig pen. One sow and two boars waited for their morning feed; the sow was queen of the herd and Rebecca made sure she got fed first so she didn't attack the two males. The pigs rooted noisily, squealing as they ate.

"Good girl," Rebecca told Chichi as she untied her dog. Chichi barked

happily and bounded towards the garden; Rebecca followed, shading her eyes against the bright sun.

The woman observed her garden, noticing the thick carrot tops showing that they would be ready to pull soon. She also saw a few weeds. "How dare you invade my garden," she growled at them, pulling them by their tiny roots. She tossed them to Chichi, who caught them in her mouth and took them to the compost pile.

Next, Rebecca watered and fertilized her garden with natural nitrogen-enriched compost that she made herself, turning it into the dirt delicately. She was covered in dirt by the time she finished, sweaty and sore from bending over constantly, but content. With a groan, she straightened and let herself and Chichi out of the hot greenhouse. Outside, the cool breeze felt like heaven on her forehead. She closed her eyes and grinned.

"Good morning." Rebecca opened her eyes to see John out on the road, apparently out for a walk. She grinned and motioned for him to join her.

"Good morning! Though it's probably nearly noon by now."

"Indeed," John agreed, glancing at the sun. He wore a T-shirt and jeans, all of which sucked up to him like a wet suit, defining his thickly-muscled frame handsomely. "How are you today, Rebecca?"

"Good," she told him. "Just finished some weeding." She waved at the greenhouse; he glanced at it and then nodded. Chichi bounded up from where she had been marking her territory in the woods and pushed against John. Chichi was big enough to knock most people over, but Rebecca noticed that the tall man didn't seem to even notice the slight roughhousing.

"Good morning, Chichi," John said with a slight chuckle, crouching to let Chichi snuffle his hair. He ruffled her fur and Chichi woofed happily.

"What brings you up thisaway?" Rebecca asked, grinning as Chichi rolled onto her back, demanding a belly rub. John obliged immediately, finding her ticklish spot and making Chichi's back leg tread air.

"Just walking," John responded with a shrug.

"Uh huh, where to?"

John glanced up the road. "Wherever that leads me."

"Hm. Want to do something much more fun?" He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye; Rebecca grinned. "It just dies a few miles up," she said, waving to the road. "There used to be houses up there, but the bridge washed out and it wasn't important enough to replace, soâ€¦"

"What do you have in mind?"

"Well, it might not be fun," she admitted. "But a high wind knocked over some trees and broke a few fences, and I could really use some

help repairing them and getting rid of the trees."

John was silent for a moment before he stood and nodded. "I'd be happy to help," he said cordially. "It's the least I can do."

"Great! I don't think I have any gloves that'll fit your hands, though." He shook his head slightly, saying he wasn't worried â€" his hands were hard enough anyway.

They gathered the fencing wire, hammer, chainsaw and hatchet, post-hole digger â€" an antique human-powered machine â€" and some new fence posts. John hefted the posts over one shoulder easily, though Rebecca could hardly carry two with both hands. She smiled gratefully and Chichi led the way to the first of the broken fence posts.

A thin pine had fallen onto the fence, blocking access to the destroyed part. Rebecca showed John how to use the chainsaw and he began cutting up the downed tree while Rebecca unwound the wire and cut it to the proper lengths. Chichi and Rebecca then helped John drag the pieces of cut-up pine into the forest, stacking them neatly under a thick pine. Rebecca would gather them later on her ATV, she said, for firewood over the winter.

John used the post-hole digger and quickly dug a new hole for the post they had brought with them. He put it in, testing it to be sure it was straight, and then held the wire taut while Rebecca secured it. Rebecca was glad for the help; doing this alone would have taken three times as long. John said simply that he was glad for something to do.

They continued on in this fashion. John didn't seem to even break a sweat as they moved tree pieces and fixed fence lines, but Rebecca knew she looked like she had been running for the past few hours. John was simply in superb shape.

Said man was hefting a log over his head when Rebecca caught a glimpse of his stomach, his rock-hard six pack marred by a thick, curling scar. John threw the log over the fence, his preferred way of "moving" the pieces he cut up, and the shirt covered the scar back up, but Rebecca had seen enough of those to know what had caused it - plasma burn.

Rebecca pretended she hadn't seen anything and tied Chichi's harness to another piece of wood. The woman and dog dragged the log into the forest while John continued throwing the pieces of wood like they were sticks.

"You're strong," she commented as she and Chichi returned. John merely smiled tightly; she was coming to understand that that smile was one he used when he was simply being polite and dropped the conversation.

"Alright, that's the last one," Rebecca said proudly as John gathered up the left-over fence posts and hefted the chainsaw. "You got that?" she asked, worried. He had been working all afternoon, though no one could tell. John nodded and followed Chichi back towards the barn; Rebecca followed with a thoughtful frown.

Rebecca's brother had recently returned from the war. Luke had only served for a few years, but he had come back a shell of himself, barely remembering her or her now-estranged husband. Rebecca glanced at the pale ring of flesh where, until recently, her marriage ring had rested. The Jerk had left her for a younger woman. However, she was content to live without the constant reminder of that relationship. It had been almost a year; she was over it, she told herself sternly.

Her brother, bless his soul, had slowly morphed back into civilian life and now lived across the valley, tending a small flock of chickens as he grew older. The town had played a big part in Luke's recovery; Grandpa Robert had given him a pair of chickens and told him that they were his new troops to raise and protect from the foxes. Having something to do, something to care about, had turned Luke around and he was back to his old self, mostly.

Rebecca had known the look in John's eyes all too well when he agreed to help her. He, too, was looking for something to do. Having amnesia complicated things; he had nothing to return to â€" at least Luke had had a family and a home. John was simply trying to fit into a world he had helped to save, and found himself lost in the attempt.

Rebecca got an idea in her head and smiled grimly. She was very maternal, despite not having children â€" she babied her animals, especially Chichi, enough. She was also very protective of her friends, and liked to think John was in that category now. He was distant, but that wasn't his fault, and she was hatching a plan slowly to bring him out of his shell. John just needed a little help from a person who knew exactly what he was going through.

Rebecca asked John â€" though he obeyed her like she was giving him orders, something she didn't mean to do â€" to clean the chainsaw off and put everything away while she went inside to prepare some food and clean up, and not in that order. Once inside, Rebecca quickly called Luke. He, hearing of her predicament, agreed to meander over for a friendly visit. With that burden from her mind, Rebecca hopped in the shower, using the cold knob because she wasn't in the mood for heat any more.

Chichi woofed as she bounded inside just as Rebecca was stepping from the shower, signaling that John had probably let her in. She wrapped a towel around herself and peeked out from the bathroom. Seeing that the coast was clear, she quickly darted into the bedroom and got dressed.

"Rebecca?" John called, sounding close. He was probably following Chichi, again.

"In here," she answered, running a brush through her wet hair to untangle it. "Make yourself at home, John."

"Thank you," he said, probably at a loss of what that meant by the confusion in his voice. She chuckled softly to herself and opened the bedroom door. Chichi grinned wolfishly up at her, John just behind her.

"I see Chichi has given you a tour of the house," she said, grinning. She avoided patting Chichi â€" she had just cleaned her hands and

didn't want to get dog hair all over them " and led the way to the kitchen, where she motioned for John to sit on one of the bar stools as she prepared lunch.

She turned to the cupboard and pulled out two glasses. "What would you like to drink?"

"Water, please." Rebecca jumped, turning quickly. John was right behind her; she dropped the glass and squeaked slightly in surprise. Her floor was damn creaky; how had he sneaked up on her?

Before the glass could shatter, though, John moved " at least, she thought he moved - and the glass was resting on the counter as though she had put it there. She glanced between it and him; his eyes seemed to dim slightly as she looked at him again.

"Sorry," he said quietly, moving back.

"No, no, not at all! You just saved that glass. I think. You did, didn't you?"

"Yes." He shrugged slightly. "I didn't want it to break."

"You've got great reflexes," she told him, turning back to the fridge and pulling out a pitcher of filtered water. She filled the glass and handed it to John. It was a fairly large glass but his even bigger hands dwarfed it.

Rebecca then poured herself a glass of water as well and rooted in the fridge. "What do you feel like for lunch?" she asked.

"I don't know," he answered. She glanced at him appraisingly, which seemed to amuse him slightly because he asked, "What?"

"You look like a bologna type of man to me," she said, grinning as she dug out said meat.

"Bologna?"

"Yeah" You know, every piece of meat that can't be called ham, turkey, or chicken. All pressed into a nice little round piece of food. Bologna." Rebecca tossed him the package; he caught it easily and eyed it, obviously unsure.

"It's good, trust me. Do you like mayo?"

"I'm not sure," he responded, still holding the bologna. "I've never had it."

"They sure don't spoil you in space," she huffed. "Well, laddy-buck, prepare for a taste bud party!"

John seemed amused, though the only indications of that was a slight crinkle around his eyes and a small tug at his upper lip. She motioned for the bologna and he handed back and then stood slightly off to her side, watching as she quickly prepared a sandwich. She smeared some white cream on one slice of bread, then something yellow on the other, slapped two pieces of bologna between them, and held it up proudly. "And _that_ is a sandwich to die for," she announced proudly.

Suddenly, the doorbell rang; John reacted instantly, turning to face the sound. Rebecca glanced up with a grin. "That must be Luke," she explained to John, who looked like he was a little startled. "He's my brother. Served in the UNSC, too. He got back just about two months ago."

Luke, hearing her voice inside, let himself in. He was tall, almost six and a half feet — still about five inches shorter than John, Rebecca guessed — with bright green eyes and sandy yellow hair that showed no signs of whitening despite his being forty five years old. He grinned as Chichi bounded over, woofing excitedly, and knelt to properly greet the dog. John hung back slightly as Rebecca greeting Luke with a hug.

Luke then turned to John, looking up at the taller man with a grin. "Afternoon, neighbor. You're John, right? I'm Luke."

John nodded and offered his hand. "Nice to meet you."

Luke seemed startled for a moment and then shook the bigger man's hand. "Likewise. My sister said you've just come back from the UNSC." John nodded again. "What ship were you stationed with?"

John shrugged. "I was on pretty much every one of them by the end," he answered truthfully. Rebecca quietly snuck back to the kitchen to let the two men talk.

"Navy? Me, too. ODST, oo-rah." He grinned, but it faded as he noticed John's eyes harden slightly. The big man suddenly looked a little more intimidating, though Luke couldn't pinpoint why. John folded his hands behind his back, taking a slightly wider stance.

"A Helljumper," John said quietly. Why did it have to be a Helljumper? Spartans and Helljumpers got along about as well as electronics and hard falls. They simply weren't compatible.

"Bingo." Luke grinned again. "What group were you with?"

"Most of them," John answered. Luke noticed that he had "gone wooden" — that's what Rebecca had dubbed the term when Luke himself shut down on her mid-conversation during the days he was fresh from the front.

"And your rank?"

John hesitated for a moment before he answered. "Master Chief Petty Officer." It wasn't quite a lie — he had received the "of the Navy" addition recently, and it was a high enough rank that it would be a dead giveaway to his real identity.

Luke whistled. "I only made Colonel myself. Too high-strung for command, that was me. So, Chief, what brings you to Yuray?"

John shrugged slightly, refusing to remember the time when he would have been called "Chief" seriously. "I wanted some peace and quiet," he finally answered. "A — friend — helped me find a house that matched my parameters."

"Big enough for a giant like you?" Luke guessed with a chuckle.

"Well, you came to the right place. We have our own drama here, though, I'll warn ya. Winter plowing is just one community project. Did Rebecca explain what happens when everyone's locked in because of snow?"

John shook his head silently. Luke noticed he was standing almost at attention and, in an attempt to lighten the mood, clapped the big man on the back. Or tried; he was still raising his hand when John suddenly moved out of reach. Luke blinked; the big guy was fast.

"Well, there's a race to the highway," Luke continued, trying to pretend like the awkward moment hadn't happened. "First one to the highway helps everyone else out, then we all have a big potluck party at the last person's house. It's our own little quirkiness."

"Are you boys still gabbering?" Rebecca yelled from the kitchen. "Lunch is ready!"

Luke smiled and motioned for John to lead the way; the big man did so quickly, and Luke had to nearly jog to keep up over the few feet it took to enter the kitchen area. Rebecca had set out sandwiches for everyone, including a ham-and-cheddar for Luke.

"Mmm, yum, sis!" Luke said, grinning winningly at Rebecca and flopping into a seat. John stood next to him, thanking Rebecca quietly. Luke studied him as they ate silently.

It was clear to him that John was struggling to fit back in. Something about him tickled Luke's memory but he let the thought go without chasing it. It would make itself apparent if it wanted.

Luke remembered his own period of hell when he returned. He wasn't ready for the carefree civilian environment, and after three years of ODS service, his nerves were wound so tight that sneaking up on him had consequences. He had felt terrible about it every time he lashed out, but Rebecca "not to mention the rest of the community" had banded together to include him.

According to Rebecca, John had no family and amnesia, a double whammy to deal with. He had also served for a long time; how he had survived, Luke couldn't imagine. Few soldiers survived past their third encounter. Most of Luke's high school friends had died on various planets in the three short years they served together.

John looked to be just over forty, close to Luke's own age. However, his reflexes were obviously still good. Luke hadn't seen any hint that he was going to move when Luke tried to clap him on the back, but he had just moved. Like it was automatic, like he didn't let anything touch him. And his eyes had hardened when Luke introduced himself as an ODS.

As far as Luke knew, ODSs were worshipped by everyone in the UNSC, though not nearly so much as the Spartans. The Spartans were the real heroes of the war, and Luke knew there was bad blood between his kind and the augmented soldiers. After a Spartan had rescued him from his own drop-pod "it had fallen sideways, clipped by a Banshee on the way down and subsequently smashing the door in so he couldn't get out" he had realized they were on the same side, though. His brothers and sisters in the Helljumper continued to taunt the Spartans,

saying very nasty things behind their backs, but Luke had always defended them.

He also knew they weren't immortal; he had watched one get blown nearly in half drawing fire away from a group of Marines by a Hunter's fuel rod canon. The Spartan had had a hole blown threw his or her middle, but kept going and managed to kill one Hunter and seriously wound the other before collapsing. Luke had seen the blood and knew the Spartans were human, not robots like so many grunts assumed.

Suddenly, something clicked into place. He looked at John carefully, noting the copious scars and better-than-average height and speed. Rebecca had had them fixing posts all day but John wasn't even sweaty, so far as Luke could tell.

John, Luke realized, was Spartan-117, the Master Chief.

Luke felt the realization hit him with a bang. He was the last Spartan; all of his brothers and sisters were dead or missing. He was probably not suffering from amnesia, then; there were rumors that the Spartans had been kidnapped as children. John might never have known his real family, and the Spartans had been everything to him. And now they were all dead. He watched the big man out of the corner of his eye as the former Spartan ate the sandwich docilely.

Rebecca saw John going back to his "wooden" state and quickly changed the topic. "So, John, what do you plan to do with yourself now that you're not in the army and just John? Uh, what is your last name?"

"Leonidas," John said after a slight pause. "And I don't know what I'm going to do." He frowned again.

"Well, have you ever worked with animals?"

"Do Grunts count?" Luke asked before John answered. Rebecca shot him a dirty look but her eyes were laughing.

"No," John answered her.

"Then it's high time you started," she declared. "I could use a hand with getting the horses ready for winter."

"I would be happy to help," John said, nodding slightly.

"Excellent. Now, brother dear, don't look at me like that." John glanced at Luke who was pouting at Rebecca playfully. "You can't have any cake."

"Awww, sis!" Luke protested. "I know you have some. You always do. Pleeeeease?"

Rebecca rolled her eyes and sighed dramatically. "Fine, you bottomless pit." She got up; John offered to help get this "cake" to which Luke was referring, but Rebecca waved for him to stay put.

"You'll love her cake, Chief," Luke said, grinning widely.

"Please, call me John."

"Right, sorry. John, got it." Rebecca emerged from the kitchen carrying three plates filled with cake. John blinked; it looked like bread with mayonnaise on it, albeit thicker bread and much whiter.

However, once he tasted it, he realized it was completely different. It was sweet, almost too much for him. The white fluff was creamy and coated his mouth with a sticky feeling; the bread part was soft and moist.

"You look like a cat in the catnip," Rebecca laughed, looking at the big man as his eyes closed slightly.

"It's really good," he said with a small smile.

"I'll send some home with you," she promised. "Luke, slow down!" she scolded as Luke wolfed his portion. They continued to talk, obviously making an effort to include John in the conversation. The brother and sister team communicated silently, keeping the topics of conversation light and carefree. Both Luke and Rebecca wanted John to feel like he had friends, like he had a life outside the UNSC. It was the least they could do, being alive practically because of the big man sitting in Rebecca's living room.

7. The Spartan Memorial

Chapter 6 - The Spartan Memorial

John sat stiffly in his dress uniform, minus most of the medals, as the brass gave their speeches to the memories of his brothers and sisters. He was down in the crowd of the stadium in an effort not to draw attention to himself. The sun was warm overhead, and the few puffy white clouds above just make the blue sky cheery. He had flown to Las Angeles for this big memorial. The small, close-knit one would be right afterwards.

"Words cannot possibly express the grief all of humanity feels for their sacrifice. I knew many of them personally, and I know they never gave up on victory. They always won, and I know they are watching us now."

John nodded silently, glancing up out of habit. _I miss you, brothers, sisters,_ he thought silently to himself, allowing himself to feel the grief that had consumed him each time he got news of another "MIA" from his team. He hadn't had time to grieve during the war, and now the loss hit him like a ton of bricks.

He could almost see them standing in front of him.

James, calm, who never gave up. He had been left in space after Covenant threatened the rescue mission John tried to initiate. They had been on the _Circumference._

Li, the best martial artist and most comfortable in micro-gravity environment. They had been repairing the _Ascendant Justice/Gettysburg_ and he had been vaporized by plasma.

Daisyâ€| He had found Daisy's body. She had tried to locate her family after the augmentations. John remembered closing her eyes, taking her teddy bear on a chain that was her most prized possession. Dr. Halsey had promised to return it to her family.

Joshua had been the best in electronics. He had been shot down in a Banshee on Reach, just before a nuke destroyed the area.

Vinh had survived Reach. John didn't know the details of her death. They had never been especially close.

Samâ€| Sam had been one of his best friends. He was the strongest of the Spartans; his hearing and vision were second to none. He had been John's second in command most of the time, though he wasn't a natural leader. Sam had been the first Spartan casualty of the war.

Isaac had been a close friend of Vinh's, and had died in the same mysterious way Vinh had.

Douglas had last been seen aboard the _Spirit of Fire_, which was missing as well. He had led Red Team, but was mostly stoic, not one to share thoughts or emotions at all, even when compared to the Spartans as a group.

Will had been reserved, always finishing everything he started. When they were young, Will had been the clown of the Spartans. He was still missing.

Anton had died with Li on the _Ascendant Justice/Gettysburg_ while protecting the repair team from the Elites that tried to sneak up on them. John remembered that he always talked about going to a beach when the war was over.

Keiichi had been killed on Reach. John hadn't know much about him; he was nearly silent all the time, preferring to hone his skills than talk.

Kurt actually outranked John; he had been socially adept, the best of the Spartans when it came to being "normal" humans. John had presumed him dead when he was thrown into space after his jet pack malfunctioned, but the ONI database still listed him as MIA. John wondered about that, but Cortana said his clearance wasn't high enough for the true story.

Jorge had been free with his opinions, almost always voicing a distaste for every political campaign he heard of. But he had also been sentimental. He had died placing a bomb on a Covenant ship, activating it manually because of a malfunction.

Linda was also still missing. She was the best with the sniper rifle, and worked well on her own. All of the Spartans did, but she was special. She would sit in a tree for hours without moving if it meant getting the perfect shot.

Malcolm had been killed when Red Team jumped from a Pelican during the battle on Reach. He was a reserved fellow, but he always made sure that everyone on his team was covered while going through enemy territory.

Maria had been wounded too critically to continue as a Spartan and

subsequently retired. John had searched her out, only to find that her augmentations had made a family life impossible. She had died in childbirth.

Soloman had been on the mission to rescue Dr. Halsey. He had found a Covenant anti-matter bomb, and managed to warn his teammates just before it destroyed him and the ship he was on. Soloman had always had some sort of light to shed on the situation, the most optimistic of the Spartans.

Arthur had also been on the mission to rescue Dr. Halsey, but his Booster Pack had malfunctioned and sent him spinning off into space. Slowly freezing or suffocating to death was the worst way to go for a Spartan. John remembered him as being quiet, but when he spoke, he always had a good opinion to share.

Kellyâ€¦ John sighed quietly. Kelly had been one of his best friends. She was the fastest Spartan, but more importantly, her wit always seemed to run apace with her feet. She was still missing, and John hoped that, one day, she would be found, maybe stuck in a cryo tube floating in the debris above a planet.

Jerome had last been seen on Spirit of Fire with Douglas. He had the same leadership skills as John, Kurt, and Fred, and had led Red Team.

Grace had died during FIRST STRIKE, and John had personally activated the fail-safe in her armor, which took out several enemies as well. She had been the explosives expert of the Spartans, and John thought she would be happy to know she had become a bomb herself.

Victor had been hard to read, the calmest of the Spartans, but he had also had a darker side. He was the most emotionally unstable and had even attacked one of his brothers. He had been killed just after the alliance with the Elites, nearly sliced in half by a Hunter.

Fred outranked John as well, and was still missing. He had always been one of the most caring of the Spartans, always trying to keep them safe.

Adrianna was the only Spartan to ever question orders from superior officers. She didn't mind being out of her MJOLNIR, John remembered, and she loved to sing, hum, whistle â€" make noise in any way. But she had been missing for years with the rest of Grey Team.

Joseph had been removed from the program after fleeing with Daisy to find his parents. He had been caught quickly, though, and dishonorably discharged from the Navy. John had looked him up only to find out that he had died in a car accident.

Alice was missing with Douglas aboard the Spirit of Fire. John wondered why so many of his Spartans had been in one place; towards the end of the war, he was told they were spread thin.

Carris had been volatile; she couldn't control her own strength sometimes, especially after the augmentations. She regretted killing anything, even Covenant, and had died protecting a squad of Marines from Hunters.

Cal had died during an assassination attempt of a Prophet. She had

been working with several ODSs, and John had heard that those ODSs had subsequently gone on to try to fix the relationship between Spartans and Helljumpers out of respect for her. Cal had always been able to make friends.

John sighed to himself. His teammates floated in his head, some missing, mostly dead. So many brave men and womenâ€¦ But they had given their lives to protect humanity, and that was what Spartans had been trained for.

The crowd rose to their feet as Hood finished his speech; John stood at attention and saluted with them. The cameras flying over their heads sought out faces in the crowd; one watched the honor guard. The twenty-one gun salute echoed through the stadium as they fired. Over two dozen caskets â€" filled with nothing but air, John knew, the dead Spartans having been cremated long before â€" rested on the shoulders of more honor guards.

They would carry said caskets into hearses waiting outside the stadium, and then the hearses would deliver the coffins to the individual Spartan's memorial around the planet. Each would be buried beneath its supposed occupant's statue.

John allowed the crowd to stream out of the stadium around him, on their way to observe the hearse parade, but the former Spartan merely stood where he was, watching something only he could see. A few soldiers â€" veteran and active â€" noticed him and shot him weird looks, but John missed them.

When the stadium was empty save for a few stragglers, John shook himself out of his reverie and walked quickly down to the knot of brass at the stadium. Admiral Hood glanced up and smiled slightly upon seeing him.

"John," he greeted, offering a hand. John shook it carefully. "I'm glad you could make it. How are you?"

"Well enough, sir. Yourself?"

"I've been better, but it feels good to finally be able to say goodbye, doesn't it?"

"Yes, sir," John responded.

"We'll be having the private memorial at my house," Hood continued, turning and walking away. John followed silently. "Out of reach of those damn cameras."

Said cameras were silently floating above them, seemingly disinterested now that the memorial was over. One, however, tracked the pair walking away, hidden by its fellows.

"How is civil life treating you, John?"

The Spartan snorted â€" Terrence raised an eyebrow. "I went to one of the remotest places in the continent and I still managed to run into a former ODS."

"Do you need to be relocated?"

"No." John waved a hand. "Luke and Rebecca â€" Rebecca is my neighbor, Luke is her brother the ODST â€" haven't figured it out yet."

"I thought ODSTs hated Spartans."

"I think Carris saved his life â€" his drop pod door was smashed in and a Spartan freed him." John shrugged slightly. "So apparently he is one of the ones who doesn't."

Hood nodded. "Have you been keeping busy?"

"I help Rebecca and Chichi â€" her dog â€" with their farm. We fixed the fence a few days ago after a bad wind storm. I don't have much to do, though."

Admiral Hood shook his head slightly. "I never thought I'd hear that coming from you, John." They walked through one of the hallways that led out of the stadium. The crowd outside had dispersed and Admiral Hood sat on a bench, looking out over the desert beyond the stadium. He motioned for John to join him.

"Well, sir, no disrespect, but the military never really let us rest for long periods of time. I find myself sleeping a lot." The taller man carefully folded his frame onto the bench.

"You could probably use it, but don't get soft on us. We may need your help sooner than we thought."

John frowned slightly. "Are the peace talks with the Elites going so badly?"

"No, no, they're progressing at a normal paceâ€" Which is to say, excruciatingly slow. Some negotiators we can't leave out â€" like the big corporation heads â€" lost family and friends and can't let go. They demand completely unrealistic payments of materials, rights to planets with ore and terrestrial potential. It's a mess."

"I don't think I could help in diplomacy," the Spartan said ruefully.

"As I said, those talks are going at a normal pace. It's painful, but normal. Kind of like childbirth." Hood chuckled. "No, we might need you to suit up again to put the Brutes back in their place. They're re-forming the Covenant, but without the Prophets. I think most of that species is dead, and the others are hiding. So far, Xylin has confirmed that the Brutes, Jackals, and Grunts have joined up, though there are rumors that each species has a group who is unwilling to return to that way of life."

John frowned. "They have hardly any ships left, sir. Most of them were under Sangheili control."

"They have the Covenant home world. Thel won't say much about it, but it's apparently where most of the ships are built. They're probably amassing a fleet right now. The head Brute â€" I can't pronounce his name, so he said to call him "the War Chieftain" but we named him "Fang" â€" has called for peace talks on a neutral planet."

"Brutes aren't interested in peace," John pointed out with a

scowl.

"They say they're willing to leave us alone if we pay homage to them," Hood chuckled. "Thel seems to think we could negotiate a mutual "leave me the hell alone" pact. With the Elite's help, we could easily overpower their small fleet. But we have to maintain the upper hand, or they'll sense weakness and attack."

"Believe me, sir. I know."

Hood nodded grimly. "Can you take them hand-to-hand?" he asked bluntly.

"I have. But not without major damage to myself and my armor. They are stronger than the Elites in an entirely different way. When they go berserk, they're deadly, and it takes a lot to put one down."

Hood laughed darkly. "We'll just have to shake them by their scruff like bad dogs." He glanced at John. "Jeeze, you haven't even been retired a month and I'm already discussing bringing you back."

"I don't mind, sir. It would be nice to have a purpose again."

"You do have a purpose, son," Hood scolded. "Cortana told me you're having difficulty fitting back in."

John scowled darkly, staring at a distant hilltop. "Cortana is feeling a little too free with information, I think. I'm getting along fine, sir. Rebecca showed me how to use most of the things I need to."

"Somehow I can't picture you doing laundry."

"I already destroyed one set of white shirts," the former soldier responded, grinning slightly at the memory.

"How?" Hood demanded, chuckling.

"I ignored the instructions and put them in with a bunch of new jeans. I now have baby-blue shirts and jeans."

"Well, at least you'll match," Hood chuckled. "But, seriously, John, find something to do. I know you were built to kill, but find something else. I could get you a job anywhere, if you're so minded."

John shook his head slightly. "I'm working with Rebecca for now, sir, and I think I might clear my land of trees and set up a small farm of my own."

"John the Farmer. Somehow, it makes sense."

"It feelsâ€¦ Goodâ€¦ To create. I was built to destroy things, and nowâ€¦ I'm growing vegetables and taking care of animals." The big man glanced at Hood and the admiral smiled slightly.

"When men like us have spent our lives destroying things, yes, it feels good to create." Hood smiled, eyes distant.

"What have you been doing?" John asked curiously.

Hood actually blushed slightly; the Spartan blinked in surprise. "I finally saw my wife again," the admiral admitted, smiling dreamily. "She's pregnant with our first child."

"Congratulations," John said. He felt a pang of regret; Kelly had always wanted children, but Spartan genetics were so different he doubted she would ever get her wish, if she was ever found. He didn't particularly want any children, nor was he romantically interested in anyone.

"Let me give you some advice, John," Hood said seriously, putting a hand on John's shoulder. "Don't wait until it's too late to start your life. You're already far behind. There's nothing you can't do, but remember that life isn't a mission. You're going to fail sometimes, but you're resilient. Get back up and try again. If nothing else, honor your brother and sister Spartans and don't give up. Do something with your life, son. Don't just let it pass you by. You'll wake up one morning and wonder what you've given humanity. And I mean as John Leonidas, not the Master Chief."

"Yes, sir," John said quietly.

"Good," Hood said, clapping him on the shoulder. "Now, time for the real memorial." Hood took a deep breath and stood. "You're welcome to ride with me, if you like."

"I brought my car, sir. I know where your house is."

"Excellent. I'll see you there, John."

"Yes, sir." John almost saluted and then remembered that he was technically a civilian and frowned slightly. Hood didn't notice, however, as he walked towards the parking lot. The Spartan turned to where he had parked his car and quickly found it amongst the crowd of vehicles. He had a rental again, a gleaming green heavy sports utility vehicle.

He booted up the GPS and found Hood's house in the memory bank. Cortana had downloaded the coordinates because it didn't show up on regular maps, for the Admiral's family's sake. The engine purred to a start and John drove out of the lot carefully.

Within half an hour, a homely mansion atop a hill filled John's windshield. He followed the signs to a lawn where half a dozen other cars were parked neatly. He parked his car next to a yellow Jeep and headed for the front porch.

Before he could knock or ring the doorbell, a woman opened the door. She smiled slightly upon seeing him, one hand resting on the slight bump on her belly. Her eyes were dark brown, matching her hair; she probably barely passed the five-foot-tall mark. John nodded courteously. "Mrs. Hood," he greeted, smiling slightly to soften his hoarse voice.

"You must be John," she said, stepping back and motioning for him to come in. "Please, call me Terry." John couldn't help but grin; Terry and Terence. "My husband is somewhere in here." Inside, polished dark wood made the floor warm to the touch as John took off his shoes.

"There's food in the kitchen, some musicians in the living room. The entire first floor is open to wandering through. It's a small crowd. I'm sure you know everyone, dear."

"Thank you, ma'am."

Terry shook her finger at the taller man. "Terry. Ma'am makes me feel old."

"Is that what all women say?" he asked curiously.

"Pardon?"

"You're the second woman I've met who said that," John explained.

Terry laughed. "Well, it does. Our mothers were 'ma'am.' Do call me Terry, hon. I'm not going to bite." She grinned up at him; he nodded.

"Okayâ€¦ Terry."

"Good boy! Now, off to the kitchen with you. Cortana is here somewhere, I knowâ€¦"

John blinked. Cortana was an AI. She wasn't capable of physical locomotion. However, he followed orders and headed into the kitchen. There was a feast spread out along the counters. A couple of high brass milled about, talking quietly. They glanced at John and nodded in greetings; John returned the greeting and selected a nibble of cheese and cracker to enjoy.

"Hey there, handsome." John grinned automatically, looking around for the source of the voice. Cortana cleared her throat from behind him; he turned around and blinked in surprise. Cortana's twelve-inch-tall avatar stood on what appeared to be a mobile holograph device. "It's a new improvement," she said. "My chip is still aboard one of the ships up in orbit, but I can control this beauty. It's almost like having a body."

"It looks good on you."

"You think? I want to paint it purple."

John chuckled. "How have you been, Cortana?"

Cortana shrugged her shoulders. "Well enough. Not nearly busy enough. I've sorted all of the data I picked up on Halo and from the Gravemind, finally." John winced; Cortana had been rampant when he rescued her. "I help with the treaty talks when I can, providing information, that sort of thing. But it's not the same without you."

He smiled slightly. "I suppose you can't really retire."

Cortana grinned and shook her head, putting her hand on her hip. "I have a new operational life of at least fifty years. Probably longer, if I continue refining the Forerunner technologies. But I'm still an AI; I can't go frolic in the sun with you and your newâ€¦ friend." Cortana wiggled her eyebrows suggestively.

"Cortana, Rebecca is just a friend." John rolled his eyes at her "uh huh, tell me another" look she shot him.

"She's a lovely woman," Cortana continued. "She has a good match in genetics to you, too. And according to my calculations, she has exactly the type of personality you are pre-disposed to enjoy."

John scowled at his friend, but his eyes laughed. "Someday, Cortana, you'll learn that we humans don't fit your algorithms so nicely."

"Well, I already know you don't," she huffed at him. "But Rebecca is getting older. Her body is urging her to continue her genetics. And you come into the picture, big, strong, handsome€| The perfect genes to pass on. It's simple instinct."

"Cortana." The Spartan shook his head. "I don't want kids. Or a relationship. They're complicated."

"Oh, they aren't all that bad," Hood said from behind John. The former Spartan turned slightly, smiling. "You just have to know that when your woman says something, she's always right."

"Damn straight," Cortana agreed. "So don't argue with me, John."

John raised his hands in surrender. "I'm overpowered."

"And you, Cortana, shame on you. John doesn't need you playing matchmaker," Hood scolded. "I'm sure he's perfectly capable of finding himself a nice little lady, if he so wishes."

John snorted softly. The only interactions he'd ever had with women were in combat. Men still far outnumbered women in the military. Dr. Halsey had been like a mother to him, to all of the Spartans, but she was missing. Cortana was an AI, and didn't really count, though she had one of the strongest personalities John had met in any sentient creature, AI, human, or alien. His fellow female Spartans were sisters, not interests. During puberty, which was accelerated, he had felt something towards Kelly, but all of the Spartans were trained to hone their emotions and that one was lost.

"I want you to meet some people," Hood told him, taking John's arm. The Spartan followed; Hood couldn't have budged the taller man otherwise. "This is Councilor James Ditrís, part of the Elite negotiations. He was responsible for giving the green-light to the original Orion Project and oversaw many of the more recent developments, including the Spartan-IIIs."

At hearing his name, a wizened old man turned and smiled toothily up at John. "And you turned out magnificently, thanks to Dr. Halsey. She was the real brains behind the whole operation." He had barely any hair, white wisps growing in small clumps around his sun-spotted head. His eyes were clearly not as good as they had been; he squinted constantly. Councilor Ditrís offered his hand; John shook it as gently as possible. The councilor just looked so fragile. "How are you, John?"

"Very well, sir. It is an honor to meet you."

He chuckled. "Believe me, the honor's mine." Admiral Hood whisked John away to meet more of the guests; John shook hands with more Councilors, heads of divisions, and top brass personnel. Each expressed their sympathy for his loss, though the man reminded them carefully that the Spartans were important to all of humanity.

Finally, just as John was starting to tire of the introductions, Hood let him go and went to find his wife. The big man retreated to the kitchen, where Cortana's pedestal still whirred around. She turned to look at him and grinned. "Enjoying yourself, little social butterfly?"

"More like social hippo," John grumbled.

"Oh, I'm sure you aren't as bad as that. Besides, I've got someone you have to meet."

John raised an eyebrow silently as Cortana led him to the back porch. Once there, though, John smiled widely and hurried down the steps. Thel heard him coming and turned, mandibles splitting in a what John had once thought was a grimace but turned out to be a smile. "Spartan!" Thel said in approval. "They told me you were retired, but that one wouldn't reveal your location." He glared playfully at Cortana, who grinned. Thel's dark armor hid most of his grey-brown skin, but his yellow snake-pupil eyes were clearly visible under his helmet. He towered a full foot over John and outweighed the Spartan by sixty pounds.

"It's good to see you, Arbiter," John chuckled, offering his hand. Thel shook it warmly, his large four-fingered hand nearly swallowing the human's. "I hear the peace talks are going well."

Thel grunted and waved a hand. "Humans and Prophets are all the same. They want more and more. But, yes, they are progressing steadily. For us warriors, it is too slow, but my leaders insist moving too quickly will result in bad treaties being made."

"And the Brutes and Covenant Loyalists?"

Thel winced. "They are rebuilding their fleet quickly. They do not have the cooperation of the Huragok, the Engineers, thankfully, or they would already be in the skies."

"How is your family?"

"Good. My son is just entering his training, and my daughter is only a few of our months behind."

"Good to hear. So Sanghelios is safe from the Loyalists?"

"For now. There are a dozen war ships in orbit as well as our fastest stealth ship that has orders to jump instantly if any Covenant Loyalists appear."

"Will you be attending those peace talks, too?"

"Possibly." Thel clacked his jaws. "I go where my superiors tell me to, though they are more interested in wresting as many planets with

usable ores from your kind than looking to the possible threats of the Jiralhanae."

"Hm. I confess that I'm glad I'm not in those talks," John said, smiling slightly. Thel nodded gracefully. "If you have need a break, I have a wonderful out-of-the-way place in the mountains."

"How can you give up your life as a warrior?" Thel wondered aloud.

John shook his head slightly. "It was retirement or a desk job. The UNSC doesn't need Spartans anymore."

"That is a grave mistake. You humans are short-lived and volatile. There will be more fighting. If not amongst yourselves, the Jiralhanae will be more than happy to attack."

"I'm not going to go soft," he chuckled. "If they need me, I'll be back."

"Go soft?" Thel poked his friend in the stomach with a finger.

John waved his friend's hand away. "It's an expression of speech. It means I won't lose my fighting ability."

"That is good," Thel declared. "I have seen these "soft" humans you speak of. Flabby creatures. It makes me wonder how your species will survive."

"Against all odds, we seem to be a pretty resilient bunch," John chuckled.

"Indeed. I meant no disrespect."

"None taken."

They continued talking and Cortana occasionally offered her opinions occassionally. The sky grew dark and guests began leaving.

"Your home â€" is it far?" Thel asked as John mentioned he should probably get back to his hotel; he had an early flight in the morning.

"Not very. A couple thousand miles."

"I will take you, then," the Arbiter offered. "I have my personal transport here; my ship is in orbit."

"I will accept that offer, thank you."

They said their goodbyes to Terry and Terrence, John wished Cortana well, and the Arbiter led the way to the ship, parked off to the side of the lawn. John arranged quickly for a courier to pick up the rental car, canceled his flight, and then climbed into the two-Elite transport. Outside, it was the shining purple that was reminiscent of Covenant battle ships, but on the inside, silver metal shone.

"It is a new design," the Arbiter explained. "They are popular back on Sanghelios. I brought one back as a personal vehicle."

"Our ancestors dreamed of flying cars, but it turns out, they're a lot more trouble than they're worth," John commented.

"If you have the only one, though, it is much more efficient than traffic jams." Thel closed the hatch and sat in the driver's seat, comfortable for an Elite but impossible for a human to use. John stood behind him, using the ceiling's hand-holds as an anchor. The ship started with a low rumble and rose smoothly.

The pair chatted amiably as they flew along. It took only an hour, much faster than the passenger jet John had used to get to LA. When they were close, the human warned Thel to camouflage the ship, which the Arbiter did after a quick explanation that John was living anonymously.

"And the humans do not attribute your size and scars to being a warrior?" Thel asked curiously.

"Wellâ€¦ I'm waiting for my neighbor's brother, a Helljumper, to put two and two together, right now."

"A Helljumper? I am unfamiliar with this type," Thel admitted. "You have so many types of humans. There are dark-skinned and light-skinned ones and ones with freckles and ones withoutâ€¦ It is too much."

"Genetic diversity," John explained with a shrug. "Helljumpers, ODSs, generally hate Spartans because we stole their thunder."

"Why would you steal a sound?"

John laughed. "No, I mean, we took their place as the best warriors in the UNSC."

"Ah." Thel nodded. "You were on the same side, though. Why would they not rejoice that such warriors fought for them?"

"Exactly. It was irrational."

"So much human is," Thel said with a theatrical sigh.

The human chuckled. "I suppose so. But Luke â€" that's the ODS â€" and his sister are keeping my secret."

Below, John caught a glimpse of his house. "That's it," he said, pointing at the house. "You can probably land in the driveway."

Thel nodded and skillfully lowered the vehicle until the gravel crunched under them. He unshielded the craft and John stepped out, Thel following when the Spartan offered to show him around.

They walked inside, Thel leaving the ship in the driveway. The Arbiter looked around, assessing the open living room as John flicked on lights. "Your houses are much more open than ours," Thel noted. "Was it difficult to find one that was tall enough for you?"

John chuckled. "Cortana helped."

"The Artificial Intelligence," Thel grunted. "She seems a very friendly thing, for a machine."

"Cortana's not a machine," John corrected quickly. "She's not. She was created from a cloned brain. She's as human as we are, but it's all codes for her. She can feel emotions, even if she doesn't have any physical senses to speak of."

Thel nodded slowly. "I know the Huragok took apart one of the chips that was such a being. They were busy for days, trying to replicate it. I am not sure that their efforts were successful."

John nodded slightly. "I ran into one, once. It was a nasty AI. And not very smart."

"Indeed. It is late; I shall allow you to rest. Do whatever you have to do. It is time I returned to my ship." Thel bent his head gracefully in a half-bow; John nodded in return and saw him to the door. Outside, there was a slight bite to the air as the Elite climbed into his ship and rose into the sky.

John watched for a moment before going inside. He was drained — emotionally and physically. Remembering all of his fellow Spartans hurt, more than he thought possible. It was easier to deal with grief if he was busy; now, his footsteps echoed through the empty house as his thoughts echoed through his head.

John left the lights on and went upstairs to the master bedroom. He wasn't planning on sleeping, but he lay on the bed anyway, crossed his ankles, and closed his eyes.

8. First Snow

Chapter 7: First Snow

Soft taps woke John, who sat up instantly, scanning the room for a threat. Seeing none, he concentrated on the sound. It was soft, almost a whisper, and coming from above him. He silently got out of bed, ignoring the chill on his bare skin, and moved downstairs, and then out onto the porch. White fluff landed on his nose; his feet sank into a soft layer of snow already forming. John smiled slightly; it was beautiful. The green and gold forest around him was slowly turning white.

He stood there, naked in the snow, for a few minutes before going back inside. First snow — at 2 AM. John sighed slightly. He never slept the night through, but he did usually get more than a few hours of sleep.

The big man sat on the couch and watched the snow fall through the windows. The full moon made it beautiful as it danced through the air, occasionally tossed around by wind.

He had been in this house for a month now. He worked with Rebecca every day, helping her to maintain her garden, exercise the horses, and keep him busy. Cortana called once a week, and Thel had dropped by for a visit and a sparring session to work out his tension. John rotated his shoulder; Thel had forgotten that he was simply human and wrenched it during the sparring. He was contrite afterwards, but John had shaken it off. Had he been in his armor, he would have been fine, but without it, he was more apt to injury.

The hours ticked by as John sat there; the sun rose on frosted trees and made everything sparkle. He got up to get dressed and start the coffee machine. He detested the drink, only resorting to it after at least a week of sleepless nights, but he used the hot water it made for a morning cup of tea.

He came back downstairs wearing thick khakis and a long-sleeved shirt. He quickly fixed himself a thermos of tea, made one of coffee for Rebecca, and grabbed his jacket on his way out the door. There was about an inch of white down in the driveway, and he quickly crunched through it to Rebecca's house.

He knocked and heard her, somewhere in the house, curse as Chichi barked in welcome. There was the sound of sleepy mutterings and then the soft tread of not-quite-awake footsteps. A very mussed-looking Rebecca in pajamas opened the door, Chichi wagging her tail by her owner's feet.

"Good morning," John greeted warmly, patting Chichi with one hand. She glared; she wasn't a morning person. John held up the thermos of coffee like a peace offering. "I brought coffee."

She grabbed it. "And that's the only reason I'm happy to see you," she muttered, walking back into the house. John tried to puzzle that comment out, shrugged, and followed her in, taking off his soaked shoes in the stone-floor section that divided the entryway from the living room. Rebecca flopped onto one of the couches in the living room, opened the thermos, and breathed in the fumes.

John sat carefully on a recliner a few feet away. Rebecca slowly sipped the hot liquid. John had remembered to add a little cream and sugar, the way she liked it, and she finished the thermos before smiling apologetically at him.

"Sorry I was a bear to you," she said. "I didn't expect you here so early."

"It's eight o'clock," John said, remembering to use civilian time.

Rebecca twisted and looked at her clock. "Huh. So it is. My alarm must've gone off without my noticing. In that case, I'm really sorry."

"Don't be," he shrugged. "I was ready for it."

"Mmmm." Rebecca lifted the thermos in a salute. "And thank you for that. I'm ready to face the world. Once I get dressed. You know it's rude to wake a woman from her beauty sleep, don't you?" she teased, getting up. John chuckled softly.

"You can make yourself some breakfast if you want. I'll be right back." Rebecca headed into her bedroom and John uncapped his own thermos of tea, drinking it carefully.

When Rebecca rejoined him, they went out to check on the animals quickly. Chichi bounded through the snow, sniffing around in excitement. John lifted the heavy bales of hay into the horse's pasture easily while Rebecca set out the grains. The horses whickered

their thanks and bent their long necks " John compared them to an Elite's, almost " to the food.

The goats were a little miffed about the snow but swarmed around as John scattered the food like Rebecca showed him. They went into the barn where the sow was grunted unhappily. He fed her quickly while Rebecca took care of the two boars.

The greenhouse was still relatively warm and Rebecca flipped a switch to turn on the heater. It didn't take much for the small building to warm up quickly, and they returned to the house. John noticed Rebecca sniffing as they went in.

"Are you okay?" he asked, concerned.

"Huh? Oh, yeah. Just a little cold." Rebecca sneezed violently, making John wince as the sound pounded on his sensitive ears. "I'll survive."

"If you need anything, let me know." It was still snowing outside, and Rebecca had told him of the blizzards she had lived through here.

"Okay. Have a good day." John nodded and let himself out with a goodbye-pat for Chichi. As he walked back to his house, he looked at the sky. The few times he had been in snow, he had been fighting for his life, and didn't get to appreciate the beauty of it. It fell on his nose, melted on his face, and crunched under his feet. John recognized it as the kind Rebecca called "hard-pack;" it clung to shoes and slowed you down. If you were running from enemies, or trying to save someone, it was a real problem.

John walked into his house and closed the door behind himself. He did an hour of weight lifting " he had bought a set that would rival a good gym's " as he watched the snow. Once he was sufficiently winded, John went to take a shower and then turned on his computer to check the weather and his e-mail, which remained empty, reminding him of his lack of friends or contacts. Outside, the snow continued to fall with the afternoon sun hidden behind clouds, and several inches now lay on his yard.

John cleaned the house " for the third time that week " before sitting down with a book, a cup of tea, and a clear view of the snow falling as dusk approached. He turned on a lamp and read silently, having found that he enjoyed fantasy-fiction stories. John had literally been on almost every planet under UNSC control, and many that weren't under human control, but in the worlds created by these authors, John had also discovered something new. Worlds came to life; cultures rose, fell, and were replaced.

He was engrossed, reading about a warrior princess leading her people against an oppressive species of alien that used humans as cannon fodder in distant wars, when his phone rang. John's nerves weren't wound so tight but he still felt a small spike of adrenaline course through his system at the sound. He shook it off and flipped open the phone.

"This is John," he said calmly.

"Turn on your TV!" Rebecca snapped from the other end. She sounded

pissed off.

"To what channel?" the big man asked calmly as he rooted around in the couch cushions for the remote before finding it under his book on the stand next to him. He pressed the button to make the holographic projector ascend from the floor, and then powered it on.

"The news. Any news. It's all over every station."

"What is?" John asked curiously as he changed to his favorite news station. He answered his own question and only years of training prevented him from uttering a sound.

"You!" Rebecca answered unnecessarily.

On screen, John "unmasked, in dress uniform" and Hood talked. The audio was muted, but the news reporter was explaining that the two had been discussing the Spartans. The video was filmed after the memorial. It was just being released after experts authenticated it, lip-readers translated the spoken words, and an extensive legal battle with the UNSC "obviously, the "good of the people" won.

"Are you seeing it?" Rebecca demanded into his ear. John jumped; he had forgotten the phone.

"Yes," John answered, his voice quiet. He concentrated on the woman in her studio, smiling smugly at the camera.

"And so, James, we've discovered the following information. The man in the video identified during the conversation with Fleet Admiral Hood as "John" is actually Master Chief Spartan-117, also known as John-117 according to our military contacts. He is living anonymously. The UNSC tried to repress this information but a judge declared that the public have a right to know the face of humanity's hero. As part of said judge's decision, we are not allowed to play the audio, as there was classified information discussed during the conversation."

"This puts to rest all of the rumors that Spartans were robots," a man on the screen laughed. The camera zoomed out to show the previous woman and new man sitting together in a studio. "This is obviously a human being, and obviously still alive. Those scars show some major damage, though. I think he's about forty."

"He's been serving in the military for almost thirty years, which means he must have started around ten years old. Could the rumors of child abduction be true? For the answer, we turn to ONI's chief public relations officer, Mr. Taki." The camera moved so that a harried-looking man glared out from the screen. "Mr. Taki, welcome. Is it true that John, known as Master Chief Spartan-117, was kidnapped as a child and trained brutally only to enter the military around ten years old?"

"You know that's classified information. I will say this, though; you have absolutely ruined his only chance at a normal life." The hatred of the ONI officer was very clear; the woman pouted slightly.

"Thankfully, we live in a time when information is meant to be

shared," the reporter retorted, turning back to the camera. Mr. Taki's picture was removed just as he was about to comment. "We have researchers looking through public records now for genetic matches to the man we saw on the video, as well as running a facial recognition program through all public records to locate this mysterious "John" for comments."

"For now, though, we have brought in Dr. McQueen, a leading psychologist often found counseling veterans of the recent Human-Covenant war, to assess the condition our hero might be in. Good evening, doctor." A slender elderly woman came into the studio and sat with the pair, smiling in return to the greeting. "Tell me, what can we expect from a man so obviously damaged â€" physically â€" by the war?"

Dr. McQueen nodded slightly. "After examining the photographs and public records of incidents in which the Master Chief was known to have taken part in during the war, I think it is entirely probable that he is having great difficulty adjusting to civilian life. He likely lives alone, has very few friends â€" if any â€" and probably doesn't sleep well. I would suspect that all Spartans received PTSD counseling during the war, and I can only hope John continues said counseling. Veterans are known for terrible bouts of depression, aggression, and emotional instability."

Rebecca was talking; John wasn't listening. He was focused on this woman who dared judge him and his brothers and sisters.

"If the rumors that the Spartans were stolen as children and trained together are true, what are the consequences of that?"

"All of the Spartans have been noted for their teamwork; put two or more together and they will work seamlessly. This speaks strongly for great unit cohesion, suggesting that they trained together for a long time. It isn't entirely unfeasible to consider that the Spartans may have trained together for years as children.

"However, this brings up all sorts of problems. If they were taken early enough, they may not remember their real families. In order to fulfill that necessary human bond of kinship, every Spartan would consider another Spartan their brother or sister. The loss of one's entire family â€" missing or dead â€" crushes a person. We've seen it a lot recently, with the Covenant-Human War and the glassing of billions."

"From the video, it's clear that John is functioning, but from his stiffness â€" you note it both while talking to the Admiral and before that, during the ceremony for the missing and dead Spartans â€" it is clear he has yet to lose the military protocol that probably was most of his life."

"Why do you think he left the military?" the man in the studio asked.

"The military has no use now for super-soldiers. It's probable that the Spartans were created in response to the Insurrectionist threats from before the Human-Covenant war, and not particularly adept at diplomacy. Current times require finesse, not heavy-hitters. He may also be deeply injured and/or considered mentally unfit for duty."

"Thanks, Dr. McQueen." The elderly woman stepped out of the studio with a nod. "Now, for those just joining us, we have discovered the identity of the last Spartan, Master Chief 117, known as John. I have just received a report from a witness." The woman looked at her tablet for a moment before smiling back at the camera. "According to our anonymous witness, John attended the Spartan memorial as a veteran, and our witness was nearby during the ceremony. He heard John speak once, simply saying, "Goodbye." To who is obvious; he was fare-welling his dead brothers and sisters."

"We have been receiving hundreds of calls regarding the Spartan's location. Let me be frank, people; ONI buried his records deep. If they just created one for him, it will take a while to track down," the man said on the camera.

Suddenly, the holographic projected sputtered to a halt. John registered a hand in his field of view and reacted, grabbing it and pulling the intruder over the couch onto the floor.

Rebecca gasped at the speed and ferocity of the assault, making herself limp as she hit the wooden floor. It still hurt. She opened her eyes to see John crouched over her, eyes slowly lighting in recognition.

"It's just me," she murmured calmly, seeing the fear and disgust for himself deep in John's eyes as he stood and pulled her up gently. "I should have made some noise, I'm sorry." She had, but John hadn't come to the door when she knocked or answered when she called into the house. "I came to check on you. You weren't answering."

Slowly, John closed his cellphone and took a deep breath, recentering himself. When he opened his eyes, Rebecca saw all the work she and Luke had done to bring out the inner John, the man she considered a very good friend, vanish. In its place was a Spartan, an angry Spartan. She paled slightly, despite knowing John would never hurt her.

The Spartan walked quickly away; Rebecca followed, concerned. "John, what are you doing?"

John didn't answer but went through his bedroom into the office. Rebecca followed, noting that the bed didn't look slept in " again. He grabbed the laptop from his desk and stormed back out to the living room, Rebecca trying to keep up. He opened the computer on his lap, turning the TV back on to the news station and watching the two reporters banter back and forth out of the corner of one eye.

"Cortana."

"Right here, Chief." Rebecca blinked; a voice spoke from the speakers. "I was watching. John, I'm so sorry"

"Why wasn't I informed that a legal battle was being fought over my identity?" John's voice was carefully, almost painfully, controlled. Rebecca stood silently, at a loss of what to do.

"Admiral Hood felt there was no reason to alarm you. Until this morning, we were winning."

"What happened?"

"Nothing we can proveâ€¦" Cortana said uncertainly. That almost made John flinch; it was very rare that Cortana didn't know exactly what was happening, even on Forerunner worlds. "But, based on the judge's decision and certain nuances from the courtroom, I think the judge was paid off."

"Can't you track his bank accounts?"

"They may have used the old credits. They're still good, you know. Justâ€¦ untraceable."

Jon growled. "How soon will they find me?"

"Based on my calculationsâ€¦ Less than half a year."

The Spartan exhaled. "Cortana, override your legal code."

"Override authorization code?" Cortana's voice was very formal; only someone who knew her well, like John, picked up the eagerness beneath it.

"Requesting officer, MCPON Sierra-117, codename John Leonidas. Authorization code LEG938722."

"Working. Done. Insert command."

"Wipe my face from every camera on this planet," John snarled.

"Processing. Accessing public servers. Searching for 80% threshold facial recognition. 881 results found. Refining search process to 90% threshold. 95 results found. Erasing. Accessing private servers. Searching for 70% threshold. 19,493 results found. Refining search process to 85% threshold. 9,584 results found. Refining to 90%. 1,450 results found. Erasing. Program initiated to destroy 95% facial recognition matches on all public and private servers."

"Did you get them all?"

Cortana's voice was serious when she answered. "Unfortunately, I can't erase human memory. They may find you through witnesses. I have to go; the admiral needs my full attention. Is Rebecca still there?"

"Right here," Rebecca answered for herself.

"John, be a dear and close your ears." John frowned at Cortana's request. "Rebecca, from your file, you are literally one of the best people in the world for him to be with right now. Can you watch over him?"

"I will," Rebecca answered softly. "Send any instructions you think will help to my phone or email."

"He's listening, isn't he? John, I'm not trying to mother you, but you aren't equipped to handle this situation. Let Rebecca help. Let her in."

Rebecca blinked in confusion, but John nodded silently and closed the laptop, breathing out deeply. He set the computer down on the side table, turned off the TV where reporters were talking about the Master Chief's successes in the recent war. "I need to tell you some things," he said quietly, motioning for her to sit on the sofa with him. She sat carefully; John leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees and linking his hands together, staring at the snow still falling outside. It was pitch black beyond the circle of light going out of the windows.

John started slowly, talking about the few memories of his family he still retained â€" how they got fuzzier every year, how he wasn't sure if they were real or invented. He spoke quietly about Dr. Halsey's coin on the playground, and his first years of training.

Soon, he was talking more quickly; his voice was monotone as he described the hundreds of training drills he and his Spartans went through. The augmentations paused him for a moment as he remembered the pain, the excruciating sensation that he was ripped limb from limb and put back together. He described his missions, his fellow Spartans, and his life to the silent woman next to him.

He finally came to a halt with his rescue from the ship that could have been his tomb. Rebecca was watching him, her eyes betraying nothing of the maelstrom of emotions she felt; mostly fear, for him, and anger, at the UNSC for taking his childhood away and giving him the wooden existence he called "life." He looked up and caught her eyes, waiting for a reaction.

"I understand much better now," Rebecca said quietly. "And Cortana is right; you aren't ready to deal with being a celebrity. First things first, though; you need some sleep." It was nearly midnight, and John looked like he had been through hell, danced with a few dozen Hunters, and returned. He wasn't showing it much, though â€" just the way his eyes scanned the room constantly, looking for threats, and his posture alerted the woman to his emotional state. She stood and offered her hand; John looked at it for a moment before carefully â€" she realized now just how _careful_ he always had to be â€" taking it and standing on his own.

She led him into the kitchen; John was like a puppet, sitting when she told him to, flinching slightly at any unexpected noise. He was much worse than when they had first met on the plane; now, it looked to Rebecca like he didn't even care what happened. She was worried. Luke had gone through a suicidal streak during his dark days after retirement, and it had looked just like this. If the Spartan got it in his head to run â€" he could easily die in the cold that barely froze the edges of the lakes â€" there was no way she could stop him.

However, John seemed completely out of touch with reality, sitting there staring at the granite countertop. His fingers traced a scar on his arm unthinkingly.

"Here, drink this." Rebecca handed John a mug of warm hot cocoa after adding cold milk to make sure he didn't scald himself. John sipped it cautiously for a second and then drained the mug in one swallow. Rebecca took the cup to the sink, rinsed it, and led John upstairs.

He followed as though he was a stranger in a new house, blinking in mild recognition when she opened the door to his bedroom and crossed the room to the bed, turning down the covers.

"Go ahead and lie down." John sat on the bed, pulled off his shirt automatically, and then lay back and swung his legs up, kicking off his shoes. They landed on the other side of the room, neatly. Rebecca turned on the lamp beside his bed and flicked off the overhead lights, casting the room in darkness. She motioned for John to roll onto his stomach; he did so, head turned away from her, and she pulled a chair up to the side of the bed and leaned over him.

His back was knotted with tension in the muscles and scars " so many she couldn't count " as she worked her way up it, massaging deeply. He slowly began to relax, his wide shoulders finally easing as she attacked a knot in his neck. Her forearms burned " it was a large area and lots of muscle to work with " but she ignored it and started to massage John's scalp. It, too, was laced with scars; she could feel the slightly raised skin under the tips of her fingers through the thick brown hair.

John's back rose steadily with his breathing, but Rebecca wasn't fooled. The Spartan wasn't asleep, but he was relaxed, at least. She finished her work on his head and slid her hand down his back, feeling the scars. He shivered slightly as her fingers ghosted over the remnants of his military career.

"That was from a Banshee," he suddenly said quietly as she touched a thick smear that probably obscured a dozen smaller scars across his lower back. "It came up behind me while I was guarding a wounded Marine. An Elite had drained my shields. It cut through my armor like butter. I lost mobility for a while, and landed over the Marine so he was protected from the Banshee. The Pelican that came for the Marine picked me up, too, even though I was flat-line. They brought me back and sent me to the ground again to secure a landing zone for evac."

Rebecca let her fingers drift to another scar. "An Elite. He had an energy sword; he was camouflaged. I was fighting a pair of Brutes when he stabbed me in the back." The scar was small, two points connected by a thin line. "It actually helped; the Brute was charging and I moved so that he was speared on the sword as well. I had to leave it in while I killed the other Brute and the Elite; it cauterized the wounds. I called for evac but no one was available, so I caught up with a squad of ODSTs. They didn't see the problem for a moment, but I remember when one of them noticed the sword sticking out of my chest." There was pain in John's voice. "He said it was obvious I was a robot; I wasn't bleeding. I was tired, hurt, and not thinking clearly; I pulled out the sword and opened the wound myself. I passed out, but they. They got me out."

Rebecca blinked back tears. How horrible were the conditions that a man was sent back to war after he died? Or that his fellow troopers taunted him for surviving what should have killed him instantly? She touched a large scar, going from his hip around the side of his chest.

"A Hunter. When they charge, they roll their shoulders and bring their spines out. They'll slice through a Spartan, armor or no armor. I was lucky there; Kelly distracted it. I would have been cut

in half otherwise. She saved my lifeâ€¦ And now I don't even know where she is," he said quietly, his fist clenching. "She could be alive, in a cryo tube with only hours of energy leftâ€¦ And we just don't know."

"It's hard to not know what happened to someone you love," Rebecca said quietly. "But you have to hope. Spartans are incredibly resourceful. Wherever Kelly, and the rest of your brothers and sisters, is, I'm sure she is trying to come back as fast as possible."

"She was always the fastestâ€¦ But you can't fight death. Sometimes, it comes, and you just have to accept it. They'll bring you back, every time. You'll have a few minutes to rest, if you're luckyâ€¦ You might even think you're truly dead this time, that you're hurt too badly to continue. But they bring you back, every time; it's your duty to come back. Every time you die, someone finds you and just won't let you rest. Spartans don't die. They go missing. Bits and pieces of them, everywhere. But nowhere. Burned to crisps. Left to freeze in space."

Rebecca let John talk, moving her hand to soothe his hair down. "No one ever knew how much Kelly loved kids; she was always just the fastest, the rabbit. She liked their innocence; the way they laughed or cried at the drop of a hat. We were never innocentâ€¦"

"Vinh and I weren't close, but she was the most beautiful of us. She used her looks to get her way a lot. She tricked a camp trainer into climbing into bed with her; then she tied him to it and left him in our barracks for the day. He was so embarrassed when Mendez asked why he was in a girl's bunkâ€¦ Vinh had tied him to the posts naked."

"Linda was the best sharpshooter. She could nail a Grunt's methane pack from two thousand yards in just the right place to make a big explosionâ€¦ And she could hide like no one I've ever known. We were dressed in bright orange for a training run once, and she still managed to disappear when the trainers ambushed us."

"Grace died as a big bomb, which must have amused her, wherever she is. She loved explosives. She would store the cleaning agents we used on our barracks and make bombs during the night. We'd leave them everywhere, just to scare the trainers. It got so bad at one point that we had to clean with water only. She still managed to find the chemicals, though, and Mendez finally gave up and ordered her not to make more bombs unless he told her to. She didn't exactly disobey him, I guess."

"James never gave up; he was so determined. He would never look for the obvious; he always suspected a trap. He saved his team's lives thousands of times. He saved mine, once; we were in the forest. Our objective was to take control of a hill. We weren't expecting much; we were nearly twelve and surpassed our trainers' expertise easily. But they cooked up something special for us that time; they had mines buried around the base of the hill. He noticed the little bump and pulled me back from stepping on itâ€¦ We unburied the mines and threw them onto our trainers' bunker."

"Soloman was so optimistic it sometimes hurt. He'd tell jokes at the worst possible times, too, and always found a silver lining. We were

out of food, water, ammo, and cover during a desert operation. It had been two days, and we were all delirious. You know what he said? He said that he finally knew what it was like to be a lizard and went around trying to lick his eyeballs for days.

"Li always protected his team. He took a shot for me in training once, and was reprimanded for putting himself in danger. He said it was worth it; that I was a crybaby when it came to getting hurt. He and I used to sit for hours and talk at night. We didn't sleep, usually â€" we always kept guards, at least. You never knew when the trainers were going to come.

"Sam was my best friend. He was so strongâ€¦ He could bend steel I-beams in any direction. He killed so many trainers accidentallyâ€¦ I always had his back, and he always had mine. And he made the best food. None of us are good cooks â€" MREs are unwrap-and-eat food â€" but he could make magic from a desert. Our favorite dinners were when Sam was with us in the forest. We'd bring down squirrels or rabbits and he'd find some wild mint or onions and bake them in clayâ€¦

"Victor was so calm. I remember, once, when we were surrounded by a dozen trainers in the prototype MJOLNIR armor, us without weaponsâ€¦ He looked like he was going for a walk in the park when I gave the signal to attack. But he was emotionally unstable after the augmentationsâ€¦

"Daisy had a little teddy bear on a chain, from her clone. She found her after we learned the truth about our past. She was so angryâ€¦ I took it off her body when she died. I hope Dr. Halsey got it to her family. Maybe it brought them peace. I hope it did.

"Jerome was a great leader. He led Red Team, sometimes. He was a little too rash, but he usually won with brute force. He wasn't the best at math; he hated Slip-space. He thought it was all too mathematical. He used to draw to explain things to himself. He could make a butterfly picture in dirt so realistic that you thought it was going to come at you. His camouflage painting was second to none.

"Alice had a beautiful voice when she used it. She wouldn't sing, though, unless you begged for minutes and gave her your dessert. But when she did sing, you'd think a whole choir was standing in front of you. She could imitate anyone, too; she mimicked Mendez so well that she got a Pelican to pick us up during a training exercise. The pilot thought our CPO was telling him to retrieve the Spartans, but she was the one on the other end of the radio. After that, the trainers started updating their vocal passwords every hour. It didn't matter. We could hear a whisper a mile away.

"Isaac and Vinh had been very close. I think they had a romantic relationship. They snuck away together some times, but so did Kelly and I, and we didn't do anything but talk. He was quiet, but he knew how to express himself without words. It was like he could make us read his mind somehow. You justâ€¦ Looked at him, and understood.

"Josh could rewire anything. He made a microwave into a bomb in our trainer's mess hall one night. They were going to surprise us in the morning with a live-fire training exercise, so we blew up their food

as a wake-up call. He liked to think that humans were just like machines; that you could reconnect a wire if something shorted. He was right in some cases, though " you pull the power on a machine and it'll die, same as a human.

"Douglas was so quiet most of the time; he didn't share anything unless it was absolutely necessary. He once led us into an ambush because he knew it wouldn't be dangerous to us. Even surprised, we crippled the trainers. It was an accident. We didn't have enough warning to pull our blows. Mendez left him in the forest for an extra night because of it. We had to communicate, he said.

"Malcolm was reserved, too, but one of the most loyal Spartans. A trainer pitted my Red Team against his Blue Team. He refused on the grounds that he would never fight someone on his own side. He was replaced and given extra homework that time. Afterwards, he agreed to it " because we all told him that it was going to make us better fighters. And Kelly threatened to pull him inside out if he made a fuss again.

"Carris was almost as strong as Sam and had very little control at the beginning, just after the augmentations. She broke so many things accidentally " she would grab a tray in line for dinner and leave dents in it, or hit a trainer and paralyze him. But she hated killing. She wasn't a really good choice for the program. She could kill, but she always hated it.

"Adrianna always questioned orders unless she thought they were good sense. She was right, some of the time, and pointed out things I missed when she was in my team. But she was a loose cannon. She was always making noise. When we were in the middle of a training run, she'd randomly burst into song. She didn't have a good voice, either. It was just painful.

"Keiichi almost never talked. He wasn't a good leader, but he was a damn good scout. He could count quickly and accurately, and invented some of the signals we used to communicate because our trainers knew the usual ones. The last time he spoke to me, he said that he would see me later; we had a sparring match to finish. Except he didn't.

"Arthur was almost as quiet as Keiichi, but he did say some good stuff. He once told us that our trainers feared us. We didn't believe him, but he was right. We looked for it when we were in training the next day, and they were scared. We could get a full-grown man to cringe by moving too quickly. Arthur knew what would happen before it did, just by watching people around us. If the trainers seemed a little too happy, he knew they were planning something vicious; if Dr. Halsey was happy, it meant we were getting upgrades.

"Will's still missing. He always finished what he started. When it first snowed on the training camp, he made a snowman. A trainer destroyed it the next day; he just rebuilt it. It became a game; we defended our snowman from the trainers, even when we were supposed to be miles away in the forest. Eventually spring overtook the snowman and it melted, but it gave us something to bond over.

"Kurt outranked me. He's still missing, too. But he was the best at social situations. One of our training exercises was in a populated city. We had to secure a landing zone without civilians seeing us. He

broke the rules a little and asked for directions to the city park. No one even suspected he was anything more than a little kid, lost in a big city.

"Fred outranked me, too. And he's missing. He was the most fatherly of us, I guess. He'd always take care of a wounded Spartan. We joked that, between him and Kelly, the children all of us would have one day would have second parents. We were really stupid back then.

"Anton loved the beach. He always wanted to retire to a coastal area on Reach, build a little cottage, and learn how to surfboard. He hated the cold so much. He once told me that he hated the idea of space so much simply because it was so cold. He died by plasma. Which is very hot. He would appreciate not freezing to death in space.

"Jorge was very opinionated. He always thought government was out of line; he was the most rebellious when it came to orders. He found ways to finish things his way. One time, we were supposed to fetch a flag from a team of trainers. They had air support, higher ground, and food. I ordered him to do some recon. He came back with the flag.

"Cal always made friends. She turned a squad of ODSTs into her friend, and since Hellies and Sparties were not on good terms, you can imagine how friendly she was. She died protecting those Helljumpers. I remember her making friends with every single Spartan during the first day of training. I didn't like her at first, but she grows on you."

John stopped, his heart thudding painfully. Dawn was pinking outside. He had been talking for hours, he realized; his throat was sore. Rebecca was still patting his head as though it would calm him.

"Remembering our loved ones, the good memories about who they were, not who they died protecting, is important," Rebecca finally said quietly. "Your brothers and sisters wouldn't want you to give up. Spartans always fight, right? We'll find the missing ones." Whether they would be dead or alive was a mystery.

"It's been years for some of them," John said sadly. "We don't even know where to start looking. I wanted to instead of retiring. Just give me a ship, a small crew, and their last known coordinates. But there were no ships, and no crews were willing to go back out and look for years for people probably long dead."

Rebecca suppressed a yawn. "Someday, when you least expect it, you'll open your door and find giant green Spartans staring at you," she predicted. "And you'll all live together like one big family, and you and Kelly will have a bunch of little Spartan brats."

"We can't."

Rebecca blinked, then involuntarily glanced at the beautifully sculpted ass inches from her hand. "Oh."

"It's all there, physically," John explained, apparently unaware that Rebecca was blushing furiously. "But our genetics are too messed up

to reproduce cleanly. Maria died trying to have a child. Besides, those were the dreams of kids. I don't want any children. This world doesn't need more freaks."

"You're not a freak," Rebecca scolded. "You're a handsome man who helped to save humanity." John started to speak but Rebecca ran right over him. "But more than that, you're a beautiful human being on the inside. You're strong in more ways than one; you're loyal, you're humorous, you're brilliantâ€¦ You can do anything you put your mind to." Rebecca sighed quietly. "You make the world seem manageable. When I've thrown in the towel, you pick it up and give it back to me. You don't ask why something is impossible, only how to make it possible."

John was silent and then rolled over to face her. "I had no idea you thought so highly of me," he said with a small chuckle. Rebecca blushed and looked down at her hand, which was still warm from where it had rested on John's back. "Cortana was right, you know. You are exactly the type of person I need to help me through this. Spartansâ€¦ We're not used to asking for help. We work alone, mostly; we're conditioned, mentally and emotionally, to be loners. More often than not, we were put on the ground with basic orders: Kill anything that isn't friendly, save as many huamsn as possible, and conjure up a few miracles while you're at it." Rebecca nodded. "I've killed thousands, probably hundreds of thousands, both human and Covenant, but you just see a man. It takes a special kind of person to see that past all this." He gestured to the scars over his chest and face as he sat up.

Rebecca leaned forward slightly, relieving the pressure on her tailbone. "Skin isn't important to me. Nor is anything made of flesh. It's the person underneath. I've always been able to read people. Sometimes I'm blind, though." She sighed softly and touched her left ring finger, something John had picked up as a sign she was remembering a bad memory.

"We all have our blind spots," he said softly. She nodded and yawned, covering her mouth. "You're tired. Why don't you sleep. I'll go take care of the animals for you." Rebecca shook her head and made to get up, but John maneuvered so she sat on the bed instead. "Sleep, please. I feel bad for keeping you up so long." Rebecca frowned slightly.

"I'm supposed to be taking care of you," she reminded him, feeling the soft bed calling to her.

"You have. I'm okay now, and it's my turn to return the favor." He smiled slightly at her; Rebecca gave up, nodded, and wiggled into the bed. John pulled the covers over her, turned off the desk lamp, and left silently. Rebecca stayed awake for a few moments, fingering the permanent white line along the base of her left ring finger. She recognized the feeling spreading to her toes as she breathed in but denied it, shoved it back. She had been hurt once, and she wasn't going to put any more pressure on John. He wasn't ready for a relationship, and he certainly deserved more than she could offer.

****Chapter 8: A Revelation****

John quietly tramped through the deep snow. It came up to his knees, nearly two feet deep. He trudged through it easily, though, and it crunched under his boots. It took a few minutes to reach Rebecca's house; he checked on the house itself, making sure it was secure, and let Chichi out before quickly feeding all of the animals. John checked each creature over for any signs of frost bite and, seeing nothing that caused alarm, led them all into the barn. He locked each horse in a stall, gave him or her water and more food, and then herded all of the goats into a single pen. John made sure the heat was on, fed the pigs, and peeked into the greenhouse. The warmth made his cold nose tingle, but it was clear everything was battened down in there and he pulled away from the heat. He had always enjoyed the cold and let it sting his cheeks on the trek back to his house.

On the way back, John thought about what had transpired as Chichi bounded beside him, playing in the snow happily. His life was changed, he knew; he would be found eventually. He refused to live like a recluse; he would go shopping for his groceries, he wouldn't hide from the cameras. When they found himâ€¦ Well, he would deal with that obstacle when it came.

For now, though, he had a new problem to work out. Rebecca had stayed with him all night, done wonderful things to his back â€" he stretched the muscles, feeling better than he had in years â€" and listened to his story without ever showing fear or disgust. Most people who knew part of the Spartan story â€" few knew the full truth â€" looked at him in revulsion. She looked at him with something else.

It reminded him, suddenly, of Terry â€" how she had looked at Terrance, a bemused smile on her face. John stopped in his tracks and examined the thought closely. His photographic memory called up Rebecca's face easily when she was taking care of him; he had watched her reflection in the window while he talked. She had been sad for him, but she didn't pity him. She had been angry at the UNSC, but she understood how important the program was.

John frowned slightly and turned his thoughts on himself. He enjoyed spending time with her, just as much as he did with his fellow Spartans. Even more, in a way; with the Spartans, he was always the Chief, the leader â€" unless Fred or Kurt was around, and even then, everyone looked to John. With Rebecca, he was just Johnâ€¦ Her incredibly strong neighbor with absolutely no social skills.

John shook his head. He couldn't go having a relationship with a civilian. Well, he was a civilian, and he could, but Rebecca wasn't ready for a relationship. She had obviously been in one recently; the ring imprint on her finger was a dead giveaway, as was the way she looked at couples in the store when she joined him on a trip to the city.

Not to mention, she deserved much better than a broken Spartan, a man without a purpose in his life.

John was resolute in his decision as he entered his house, letting Chichi into the backyard. He could hear Rebecca snoring quietly upstairs, undoubtedly already on her stomach, her favorite sleeping position.

He shook his head at himself and went to the kitchen, made himself a cup of tea, and smiled softly to himself as he noticed the hot cocoa from last night. He fixed a cup of that for himself as well and then went to the living room, turned on the lamp, and picked up his book.

~~ Some time later~~

Rebecca woke with a groan. The bed was so warm and cozy! She just didn't want to wake up. She refused to acknowledge the thoughts running through her head and then groaned as she realized that, by doing so, she had awakened her own self.

Muttering curses, Rebecca rose. She blinked when her feet met carpet; her room was wooden-floored. She looked around and smiled slightly, remembering; she was in John's house. The house was silent as Rebecca rose, but before she could make it to the door, John opened it and walked in with a mug of coffee.

"Good afternoon," he said warmly. She smiled and accepted the coffee. "How are you feeling?"

"Rested," she said, sipping the hot liquid. "How are you?"

"I have come to terms with what will happen next," he said with a grin, shrugging his shoulders. "And I've decided that having no control is a terrible condition to be in, but one I will have to get used to."

"Good. Breakthrough number one." She rubbed her face. "Thanks for letting me sleep here."

"You're welcome. I dare say we are about to have visitors, though." Rebecca was alarmed, but blinked in confusion when John chuckled. He was in a good mood. "The good kind. The whole town is coming to find out what happened to us. First snow, and we haven't showed our noses in almost a day. It's deep out there. It'll take them a while to plow their way up here."

He was rambling, too. Something he didn't do. She eyed him suspiciously; John smiled and turned to the door. "Chichi is here, too. She misses you."

Rebecca led the way into the backyard where Chichi leapt all over her. Laughing quietly, John braced her when Chichi tried her best to bring Rebecca down to where the dog could lick every inch of her face and make sure the human was really okay.

"Down, Chichi," Rebecca laughed, scooping up a handful of snow in her bare hands and throwing it at the dog. Chichi chomped on the snow and woofed, wagging her body. Rebecca leaned forward, picking up more snow and throwing it at Chichi, who continued catching it.

John watched quietly, smiling to himself. He could hear the plows approaching; they were a mile away. Plenty of time for Rebecca and Chichi to enjoy some snow.

John reacted before he realized what was flying his way; he ducked the snowball and turned, astonished, to where Rebecca was grinning

wickedly. "Come on, no brooding!" she yelled, hurling another snowball at him. John dodged it easily and raised an eyebrow. "Hold still, hoodlum."

Rebecca continued throwing snowballs; Chichi kept trying to catch them, and John kept dodging them. He carefully formed one of his own, being sure not to pack it too tight, and sent it back at Rebecca, lobbing it gently. She dived away from it, landing in the snow and sticking out her tongue. "Missed me!"

"We'll see about that," John muttered, grinning. He bent and quickly dug a hollow around himself. Then he hunkered down and began building snowballs.

His efforts were sabotaged, however, as Chichi bounded into his hole, apparently after another snowball. Dog and man went down, rolling in the snow. John let Chichi go and rolled to avoid an onslaught of snowballs. He hurled a fistful in the direction they came from; Rebecca yelled as he scored a direct hit to her shoulder.

"Chichi, get him!" Rebecca cried as she charged, hands full of snow. John grinned and let her jump on him, pushing the snow into his face. She laughed merrily and he grabbed her sides, rolled, and pinned her to the snow.

"You know, tackling a Spartan is a very bad idea," he said quietly, shaking the snow from his hair.

Rebecca wiggled her hips experimentally, but John's legs were clamped like vices over her thighs. "Yeah, well," she panted, "you weren't holding still."

"Hmm," he hummed thoughtfully. He sat up and let her hands free. She was still pinned, though, as she mock-glared at the man.

"That's not very nice," she scolded, scooping up a handful of snow and flinging it at his face; he tilted his head to the side and it sailed cleanly past. Chichi ran after it, abandoning her.

John cocked his head and stood suddenly; Rebecca blinked up at him as he tilted his head again and then focused on the driveway. He looked down and offered her a hand; she stood, puzzled. "They're here," she explained. "Luke's banging on the front door."

Rebecca stuffed her hands into her armpits and tromped inside, stomping the snow from her boots as she walked through the living room. John made sure Chichi stayed in the yard and then joined her just as she opened the door to let Luke in.

"Sis?" he asked, clearly startled to find her "and obviously mussed from the recent snow fight" at John's house.

"No, her twin sister," she said sarcastically with a grin, stepping out onto the front porch with him. John joined them, nodding a greeting to Luke. Five trucks were parked in his driveway, and their owners "plus a few guests, it looked like" milled about.

"We were just making sure you were alright. I didn't hear from you since the storm hit," Luke said softly.

Rebecca nodded. "We wereâ€¦ Dealing with some stuff. Did you catch the news?"

Luke nodded, glancing at John. "I'm sorry, big guy. No one here'll rat you out."

"Good to know," John said softly. "Introduce me to your friends?"

Luke blinked, glanced at Rebecca, who nodded encouragingly, and led John to the trucks. John shook hands, smiled, and acted like nothing had just changed his life forever. In fact, he was much more relaxed than Luke had ever seen him. The former ODS glanced at Rebecca, who was watching John with a small smirk on her face. Luke frowned slightly. He hadn't approved of Rebecca's husband â€" and his suspicions had turned out right, The Jerk being a bastard through and through â€" but he knew the look on her face.

He glanced back at John. There were worse choices, he thought. The big brother in him just wanted to keep all men away from his little sister, but he also knew that John would never do anything to harm Rebecca. He was always very, very gentle with her â€" with him, too, but there wasn't often a time he needed to be. But he was still a soldier, and Luke would have said he was still broken inside except that John seemed to be functioning perfectly well.

He drifted over to Rebecca as John talked to the plow drivers. "So, sisterâ€¦ What's up?" he asked, not bothering to hide the curiosity in his voice. Rebecca glanced at him.

"What do you mean?" She smiled slightly at him, her eyes twinkling.

"You and John," Luke clarified with a smile that said, "Don't mess with me."

"It was a rough night," she admitted. "He's so tornâ€¦ But I think he's coming through. We had a few breakthroughs while we talked last night."

"Uh huhâ€¦ And did any of those "breakthroughs" involve actually breaking something during a fit of passion?"

Rebecca blinked in confusion. "What?"

Luke sighed. "Beccaâ€¦ Are you falling for John?"

Rebecca was silent for a moment and then glanced at where John, apparently oblivious, was laughing at a driver's joke. But he had heard the trucks coming a mile away; he could certainly hear them. She shook her head.

"You sure? I know that look."

"Shut up, Luke."

John frowned slightly to himself as he listened to Luke and Rebecca. Luke was protective of his sister, John knew, but the conclusions he came to were startling at best. John was determined not to allow himself to think of Rebecca in that way, or as more than a very good

friend.

John shook his head slightly and turned his attention back to the man in front of him, who was saying that he would make sure no one talked about who John really was. It was strange, to be in the company of so many people and not have them staring at him with revulsion or fear. They took him as a man â€" sure, he was famous, but he was in their pond now, and he was only as he made himself in their eyes.

"Yer a big fishie out there, John," one of the drivers commented. "And I don't doubt you could prolly pick this here truck up. But here, yer on our turf, and we think yer just a man, and just a man you are."

"In a strange way, that makes me feel better," John admitted.

The driver, Gurney, grunted. "Yeah, well, we ain't gonna take advantage of ya. We don't do that here. We have something; it's called common sense. 'Cept it ain't that common, if'n ya know what I mean."

"I think so," he admitted. "Still, I can be helpful, former Spartan or not. I'm always available, so just ask if you need help."

"I'll letcha know," the men assured him. John smiled, and suddenly felt like he belonged. It was a wonderful feeling. He had belonged to one group his entire life; the Spartans. Sure, he was part of UNSC, but he was also a stranger to it, in a way. Here, these men were just including him in their circle without question or reservation. He grinned slightly and glanced at Rebecca, who smiled back.

"We'll be on our way now," Gurney said. "We'll plow ya out, Becky, never fear." Rebecca grinned and thanked him from the porch. "Have a good day, folks."

The team loaded back up into the trucks and headed out. Rebecca went back inside, cold, and Luke joined the plowers. John waved goodbye and then followed Rebecca into the kitchen where she was enjoying a cup of hot coffee, holding the mug close to her as though she wanted to absorb its warmth.

"A hell of a dump for our first snow," she said brightly, grinning at him. John smiled and nodded. "How are the animals?"

"Good. Missy was a little skittish, but she calmed down." Missy was the name of the sow. "They're all in the barn. The greenhouse looks fine, too."

"Excellent, thank you." John sat next to Rebecca with a mug of hot tea and offered her a plate of biscuits from his fridge. She nibbled one hungrily, just remembering that she hadn't had dinner. John spread his with butter and dipped it in his tea.

"So, what now?" John asked. "The drivers are plowing out your house. You're welcome to stay here until they do, of course."

"I want a rematch," Rebecca laughed. "And this time, I get to build a fort first."

"Okay," John nodded. "I have gloves you can wear this time."

"Thank you. My poor little fingers were frozen!" She wiggled her fingers at him and John chuckled. "Well, shall we?"

John stood and went to the closet for the warm clothing while Rebecca took the dishes to the sink and rinsed them. They met at the back door; Chichi slobbered at the window while John handed Rebecca a pair of gloves, a hat, and a jacket. She zipped up the jacket and shot outside to begin building her fort. John followed more slowly, lobbing snowballs for Chichi to keep the dog occupied.

"Okay, ready!" Rebecca yelled, ducking behind her fort. John chuckled and moved sideways, side-arming a snowball directly into the side of the fort. Rebecca yelped as it tore away a chunk of her defenses and popped up like a prairie dog, threw a snowball at the first movement she saw, and lay back down.

John easily avoided the missile, moving forward and sideways as she continued to pelt snow at him. He was within reaching distance by the time she stood to deliver her fifth snowball; it caught him right in the face but he ignored the cold, closed his eyes, and jumped over the barrier.

Rebecca squeaked and tried to run for it, but he grabbed her arm and tripped her into a big pile of soft snow. She went down and snow fluffed up around her, half-burying her arms as she flailed. John quickly pinned her again, pushing them both deeper into the white powder. Chichi barked and romped as Rebecca squirmed, laughing loudly.

"Alright, alright, you win!" she yelled as snow went down her back. "Mercy! Uncle!" John chuckled and sat up, shifting to sit next to her as Rebecca swam to the surface again, laughing happily. "You're too good. I need an ally. Chichi, where were you?!" Said dog woofed and leapt into John's lap, who made an "oof" sound and shoved snow in her face with a chuckle.

"I love the snow," Rebecca sighed, lying back and waving her arms and legs. John watched curiously; a shape began to form. "It's a snow angel," she explained. "See? My arms are the wings and my legs make the dress part."

John lay back and copied her, then carefully extracted himself from his snow angel without messing it up too badly. He looked at it, cocking his head slightly. Rebecca looked between theirs. "Yours is so big," she said with a giggle. She jumped on both of the angels and obliterated them with a few sweeps of her arms, grinning. "Something about snow, I swearâ€¦" she said happily, flopping back into the mess she had made. "Brings out the inner kid in me."

"It is enjoyable to play in," John agreed, sitting next to her. "I remember one time during trainingâ€¦" He gathered a handful of the snow and let it run through his gloved fingers. "It snowed while we were on a training mission in the mountains. We had all gathered â€" there were about sixty of us. We found a few shelters and spread out, but we didn't light any fires. We hid from our trainers, just to prove to them we could survive in any conditions. All we had were our training clothes and the woods. We made it for a week before they started rounding us up. But during that week, we dug these amazing tunnels between the shelters. We were like giant ground hogsâ€¦" John

smiled softly. "When the trainers finally realized we had gone underground when they raided one of our sites, they started dropping gas into the tunnels. We collapsed some right under the trainers, burying them."

"They don't sound very nice," Rebecca said, looking up at the grey sky.

"They weren't supposed to be. They tried their best to kill us every day." John drew his forefinger across his face, curving the path to look like a banana; Rebecca tilted her head. "So we'd learn what it was like to have everyone but your brother or sister trying to kill you. Well, and Dr. Halsey," he chuckled. "She was like our mother..."

"But she sent you to your deaths. Most of you."

John nodded, smiling. "It was necessary. We were trained to handle killing, dyingâ€¦ We were as good as any soldier by the time we were fourteen, better than 95% of the regular infantry. We were supposed to be a force against the Innies, but once the Covenant attackedâ€¦ Can you imagine what would have happened if we hadn't been ready in time? If there had been fewer of us?"

Rebecca shuddered; John noticed and shook his head with a small smile. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to ruin the mood."

"It's fine," Rebecca shrugged, patting his hand. "What was that thing you did earlier? With your finger?"

John smiled slightly and drew his forefinger over his face again. "In our armor, we can't see each other's faces. We knew each other well enough to communicate without thatâ€¦ But sometimes, we wanted to express ourselves. It's a Spartan smile."

"Oh. Did you have a whole code or something?"

John whistled a six-note tune. "_Oly Oly Oxen Freeâ€¦_"

"Isn't that an old game code?"

John nodded. "It was our all-clear signal. No one used it but usâ€¦ The trainers knew the regular military signals, you see. We needed something different."

"Hmmmâ€¦" Rebecca whistled the tune herself; John smiled slightly. "What about "danger" or "enemies"?"

"We had hand-signals," John shrugged. Rebecca thought about that for a minute and, sensing that John was brooding again, threw snow at him. John dodged it and eyed her. "What was that for?"

"It's a beautiful day, the news people obviously haven't found you, and you're here brooding," she scolded. "If you don't brighten up, I'm going to tickle you."

"I'm not ticklish," he said seriously.

"Damn." She sighed and put her hand under his chin, watching him. "What _is_ your weakness?"

John blinked. He had been trained to only do one thing, and he did it so well that he didn't really have a weakness. Well, he did, actuallyâ€¦ John frowned slightly. "Everything, nowâ€¦ Civilian life, cooking, cleaningâ€¦" He sighed slightly.

"Woah, come back down to my level," Rebecca teased. "Something light-hearted. Come on, John. Out with it. Spill."

John cocked an eyebrow. "Hmmmâ€¦" He thought back and then chuckled slightly, prompting Rebecca to make a curious sound. "You'll think this is really silly, but I hate being noticed."

"â€¦ Really." Rebecca's voice was dry as she grinned at him. "You have every medal in the UNSC â€" and one that no one else has â€" and you hate to be noticed?" She chuckled slightly.

John shook his head. "I told you, it's stupid."

"No, actually, it makes perfect sense. You grew up different. You want to be normal."

John raised an eyebrow with a smirk. "I don't think "normal" will ever describe me."

"John, I hate to say this, but your cooking is definitely mediocre. At best." Rebecca grinned.

John pouted at her comically. "I'm learning," he huffed.

"Uh huh. Take up a new hobby."

John lay back in the snow. Rebecca watched as his chest moved in and out with his slow, even breaths. "I was actually thinking about starting a campâ€¦ You know, for the orphans from the war?" He said it almost silently, more to himself than her. Rebecca waited, almost holding her breath. "I'm not great with kids, butâ€¦ I rescued so many of them and sometimes I couldn't save their parents. They deserve better than crowded foster homes and hand-me-down clothes with patches and tears and pee stains. A few weeks in the outdoors, learning about what they can do, instead of focusing on how they lost everything and are now a burden on societyâ€¦"

He rolled over, clearing the snow from his face to look at her. "Is that stupid or what?" he said with a small snort at himself before rolling back over onto his back. Rebecca leaned over so he could see her face; he caught her eyes.

"It's not stupid," she said quietly. "Bettunia was so lucky that her grandfather is here. She still has family; the whole town pretty much adopted her. But so many don'tâ€¦ I think it's a noble thing, if you really want to do it."

"It was more of a stray thought," he admitted. "I get so bored, I think anything's a good idea if it gives me something to do. And I can't go back to the military; the best job they could offer me is as a trainer, and I don't have the right stuff for that." He smirked. "Even in fifty years, I'll be able to outrun the most in-shape person on the planet."

"I think you'd be good with children. Maybe not when on the battlefield, butâ€¦ You're very gentle, John," she said, tapping his chest with a forefinger. "You can read someone like an open book. You listen and don't ever think anything is stupid. A kid likes that. Most adults tell them their imaginary friends don't exist."

"Sometimes, they're the only friends worth having," John muttered, smiling slightly.

"How about you help me with a field trip on Thursday?" Rebecca suggested. "I was going to ask anyway. The kids are coming up to the farm to see what real animals look like, smell like, feel likeâ€¦ It'll show you I'm right."

He grinned. "A woman is always right," he said.

"Damn straight," Rebecca agreed, grinning. "Who taught you that?"

John raised an eyebrow. "Kelly. When I walked into an ambush she warned me might be ahead. She never let me forget it, either."

"I think I'd like her, if I get to meet her."

"I think you'll get along really well," John agreed, smiling at the dark grey sky. Suddenly, he frowned and sat up, waving for Rebecca to be quiet when she was about to say something. He stood, cocked his head, and then smiled and motioned for her to stand.

"Have you ever met an Elite?" he asked. Rebecca blinked.

"Umâ€¦ Noâ€¦ Why?"

"Well, you're about to." John grinned and took her hand, leading her towards the back porch. He took Chichi's collar and held her at his side. Around them, suddenly, the snow kicked up like it was being pushed away by a strong wind. Rebecca squeaked in surprise as a bright purple air craft appeared out of thin air as it landed in the back yard where they had been sitting a moment before. Chichi started barking wildly; Rebecca knelt to calm her down and John moved towards the craft even as it settled into the deep snow.

He banged on the nose of the craft and a door in the side popped open. A very tall Elite stepped out. Rebecca squeaked again. The Elite dwarfed John by a good foot; his armor was dark blue or black, his skin beneath it â€" if it was skin â€" just as dark. However, John didn't appear worried as he smiled and said something. The Elite's four mandibles separated and he warbled slightly; John relaxed and turned to Rebecca, waving for the Elite to follow him.

"Rebecca, this is Thel 'Vadam, the Arbiter," he introduced as they came to stand with her on the porch. The Elite bowed his thick neck, bringing his face nearly on level with hers. "Thel, this is Rebecca, my neighbor."

"It is a pleasure to meet you," the Elite said, his voice even deeper than John's and gravelly. His mandibles clicked together as he offered his hand, which Rebecca carefully shook. His eyes were yellow

with slit pupils; Rebecca was reminded uncomfortably of a snake.

"The honor is mine," she replied formally. "This is Chichi."

"Chichi." Thel obviously had trouble pronouncing the name, but he offered his hand to the dog. Chichi's hackles were up and she sniffed him carefully before letting them go down. "It is a dog?"

"Yes. A Newfoundland, a breed of dogs bred to do water work."

"Ah. It is a pet?"

"She is," Rebecca confirmed. "She's my friend."

Thel straightened and Rebecca shifted slightly to put John and Chichi between her and the Elite. She knew they didn't miss it, but neither commented. "Spartan, I bring ill news," Thel said.

John sighed. "You'd better come in," he said, motioning to the door. Thel blinked at it, clearly unaccustomed to door "or maybe door knobs, Rebecca guessed.

Rebecca followed John inside; Thel followed her, ducking his head to get through the door. She took off her shoes and peeked at the Elite's foot; it was fully armored and thick, almost more like an elephant's foot than anything she had seen before.

He caught her staring and his mandibles clicked softly. "I apologize for intruding, ma'am," he said quietly. "I'm afraid my news cannot wait. You are welcome to listen, as I do believe you know who you are neighbors with."

"Yes," she admitted. "I've been watching over him."

Thel blinked, his mandibles stretching for a moment before closing again. It fascinated her in a way. "Watching over him?"

"He had some problems after the news announcementâ€¦ We caught it on TV," she explained. "I think it hurt him a lot more than he's letting on."

"Yes." Thel looked at John, who was watching them talk. "Then you will not appreciate the news I bring. I am sorry, my friend, but they have managed to track you to the mountains. They are closing in on your position. If you wish, I can arrange for a cloaking device to be set up around the perimeter."

John shook his head slightly, waving a hand. "That wouldn't be necessary, Thel. They'll find me anyway. I'll be ready for them." He smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes.

"Humans, I will never understand," Thel sighed as he sat on the couch carefully, folding his backwards knees awkwardly. Rebecca sat in a chair and John stood in front of the windows, watching the snow. "I also bring other news. Your AI friend has been reprimanded for herâ€¦ What did they call it? Her stunt, that was itâ€¦ She was reprimanded for her stunt with the servers but they cannot easily punish her, so she has been ordered to sever all personal contact with you. Which is

why I am acting as a messenger for her; she said to bring you this." Thel clicked open a compartment in his armor and handed John a small chip; John took it with a nod. "It contains an encryption that will secure your laptop so you may continue to communicate."

"Thank you," John said softly. "Enough about me. How are the peace talks going?"

Thel growled; Rebecca blinked and shifted slightly. "Apologies, ma'am," Thel said quickly, unclenching his fist.

"He won't hurt you," John assured Rebecca. "You were saying?"

"They progress slowlyâ€¦ I feel that they are sliding backwards, as you say. The humans are concerned with rebuilding and expanding again. They want minerals, millions of tons of ores and laborers to help rebuild their fleet. They refuse to consider upgrading to our ships, as we have too many ships and too few pilots now. They will accept blue prints and schematics, but they will extensively test them before implementing the technology."

"We've spent thirty years testing that technology," John said bitterly. "I'd say it works just fine."

"Indeed," Thel agreed. "Yet they insist upon going slowly. The Jiralhanae are growing more bold each day, sending warnings and threats. They will "extinguish the flames of blasphemy of the human-Sangheili union" and "destroy all those who do defile the Forerunner artifacts" I believe is the literal translation."

"They're pissed and they want blood," John translated with a frown. "What does Xylin think?"

"He is moving nearly as slowly as the humans. He becomes more and more interested in politics with each passing day." The tone of Thel's voice was obviously contempt. "He is a great warrior but I fear he is becoming clouded with power."

"He doesn't strike me as the type to grow a big head."

"Please, speak plainly," Thel asked, raising a hand to his head. "Your human language is complicated enough without metaphors."

"Sorry," John chuckled. "I didn't think Xylin was the type of Elite to let power interfere with his principles."

"Unfortunately, our estimation of him was grossly overstated," Thel said with a grimace. "But, I do bring good news as well. Through our efforts, we have secured most of the Unggoy as our allies. They will man our ships, fight the Jiralhanae, and live in peace with both human and Sangheili in return for endless supplies of methane, protection of Balaho, their home world, and their disgusting food."

"Grunts?" John asked, surprised. "I thought the Brutes had won them over."

"We made a better offer, and we do not kill out of pleasure," Thel

said smugly. "We will not turn on the Grunts if there is not enough meat to feed all."

"Good point," John agreed. "What of the Jackals?"

"They remain allied with the Covenant Loyalists, but there are few of them anyway."

"And the rest of the races?"

"Most are undecided yet. We are engaging each in a series of political talks. It is very straining."

John shook his head. "I don't know how you do it, Thel. I couldn't."

Thel smiled. "You do not know the trial of a female. Humans are not nearly so difficult as our own wives." Rebecca snorted softly; Thel grinned " though Rebecca obviously didn't know what he was doing " at her. "You are a human female, are you not?"

"Yes, we call ourselves "women," she said with a smile.

"And are you Spartan's mate?"

Rebecca blinked, glanced at John, and then back at Thel. John laughed. "No, Thel, we're not mated. And you need to learn more human manners. It's not a polite question to ask a human."

"Oh." Thel rumbled and shook his head slightly. "My apologies, ma'am. In Sangheili culture, Spartan would make a worthy mate to any eligible female. It would be considered an honor."

"Remind me to explain human relationships to you some day," John muttered at Thel, who sighed.

"Human culture is too difficult to understand sometimes," he complained, clacking his mandibles. "You have so many ways to react. If someone insults you, you may ignore it for the sake of appearing "mature" " yet hitting them or calling a duel is frowned upon."

"We're a little nuts," Rebecca admitted, getting over her embarrassment at the question. Obviously the two males were over it; they chuckled.

"It truly is a mystery to me how your race has survived," Thel said absently. "Were you all Demons, I could understand, but you are so breakable"

Rebecca frowned. "We're creative, resourceful," she said defensively. "We did kick Covenant ass sometimes, I'll have you know."

Thel raised both hands in a universal surrender gesture. "I meant no disrespect, women."

"A single female is a woman," John murmured.

"Woman. Women. Why the difference? Other words are pluralized with an "s." He hissed slightly.

Rebecca chuckled. "You know, I truly believe that the English language was created just to piss everyone off."

"I would agree," Thel said quickly.

John grinned; Rebecca was obviously getting more comfortable around Thel, which made him happy. He didn't want one of his friends scared of the Arbiter. He had done too much for humanity to be scorned.

He turned to look out the window at the craft. Chichi was peeing on one of the supports where it touched the ground; John chuckled silently to himself.

"I must return. My absence will be noted." Thel stood and clapped John gently on the shoulder; John smiled slightly and flashed him a quick Spartan smile. Rebecca saw the ease with which John treated the Arbiter and hoped he would become so comfortable around humans, too, someday.

Thel went back to his craft; Chichi followed him, sniffing at his heels until he boarded and shut the door. Then she barked as the craft lifted and flew away, active camouflage hiding it from sight quickly.

Rebecca stood and joined John near the window. "Wellâ€¦ That was exciting."

"Hmmm." John was obviously deep in thought. Rebecca leaned against the window, watching Chichi bury herself in the snow.

John was thinking as he stared at the snow, now mashed down and packed by the two snowball fights and the aircraft landing in his back yard. He was worried about the treaty with the Sangheili; if they didn't join forces soon, the Brutes were liable to attack when they were divided.

"Is it really Wednesday?" Rebecca muttered, glancing at her cellphone. "Gods, time runs fast."

"It is nearly dinner time," John said. "Would you care to stay for some of my "mediocre" food?" he asked teasingly.

"I'd stay even if you handed me an MRE," she laughed. "But I do need to get home tonight. I need a shower. I probably smell like a towel."

John blinked and decided not to comment. "I'll take your jacket, if you want." She shrugged it off and handed it to him with a smile; he took that, her gloves, and the hat back to the closet, hanging them up to dry, and then found her in the kitchen.

"What would you like for dinner?" he asked, opening the fridge.

"I'm feeling like something nice and warm and filling. First snow tradition," she said, coming up next to him. "What've you got?" She squirmed in between him and the fridge and started digging, muttering to herself. John moved away slightly, letting her root to her heart's content.

"Aha!" she cried, stepping back with a package of chicken breasts. "We'll make chicken pasta. You can boil pasta, right?" she asked John, grinning.

"I haven't learned how to burn water yet," he answered with a chuckle. He pulled a large pot from a cupboard and set it gently on the stove, lighting the flame and then pouring in cold water. He salted it and stepped into the pantry to find spaghetti.

Meanwhile, Rebecca went out to the living room, found the TV remote, and turned on the TV to a music station. She grinned when an old country song started playing. She swished her hips and went back into the kitchen, signing along as she chopped up the chicken.

"Say you're sorry, that face of an angel comes out just when you need it toâ€¦ As I pace back and forth all this time because I honestly believed in youâ€¦ Holdin' on, the days drag on; stupid girl, I should've known, I should've knownâ€¦ I'm not a princess, this ain't a fairytale, I'm not the one you'll sweep off her feet, lead her up the stairwell. This ain't Hollywood, this's a small town, I was a dreamer and you let me down, now it's too late for you and your white horseâ€¦ to come aroundâ€¦"

She grinned and continued. "Baby, I was naÃ¬veâ€¦ Got lost in your eyes, never really had a chance. My mistake, I didn't know to be in love you had to fight to have the upper hand. I had so many dreams about you and me, happy endings, now I knowâ€¦ I'm not a princess, this ain't a fairytale, I'm not the one you'll sweep off her feet, lead her up the stairwell. This ain't Hollywood, this's a small town, I was a dreamer and you let me down, now it's too late for you and your white horseâ€¦ to come aroundâ€¦ And there you are on your knees, begging for forgiveness, begging for meâ€¦ Just like I always wanted, but I'm so sorryâ€¦ Cuz I'm not your princess, this ain't a fairytale, I'm gonna find someone someday who might actually treat me well. This is a big world, that was a small, there in the rearview mirror disappearing nowâ€¦ And it's too late for you and white horseâ€¦ Now it's too late for you and your whit horse to catch me nowâ€¦"

She danced across the kitchen and put the chicken in the skillet. "Oh-h-h-h, try to catch me now-w-w, oh-oh," she sang, bouncing as she poured tomato sauce over the chicken and checked the water.

"You have a beautiful voice."

Rebecca squeaked and turned around; John was standing right behind her. She leaned back slightly to see his face and smiled, blushing. "I don't usually get so caught up in a songâ€¦ But it's one of my favorites. Afterâ€¦" She paused and shook her head. "Never mind. It just is."

John frowned slightly and moved back; Rebecca sighed quietly. He had been right there; she had practically been staring at his muscular chest, which, despite the largest clothes they had found at the department store, was beautifully defined.

Stop it, she growled at herself, turning to check the chicken. It was turning white nicely, and the tomato sauce was heating up well. John dumped the pasta into the boiling water beside her as the song changed on the TV.

She laughed. "When you see a deer, you see Bambiâ€|"

Suddenly, John joined in. "And I see antlers up on the wall. When you see a lake you think picnicsâ€|"

"And I see a large mouth up under that log," Rebecca sang, grinning. They continued signing back and forth, her husky alto matching his deep bass note for note as they sang along.

John smiled to see Rebecca so happy. He had enjoyed this song when he first heard it; music education had been part of his training, since Dr. Halsey argued that music was proven to improve a child's quality of life. John had loved country music, especially the stuff from the early 21st century.

"I don't highlight my hair, I've still got a pair," he sang loudly, chuckling at the expression on Rebecca's face as she continued the song.

It finished and both chuckled. "You've got a great voice," she complimented him. "The chicken's done."

"I'll drain the pasta," John said quietly, lifting the large pot easily. He poured the noodles and boiling water into the collinder in the sink and put the pot back on the stove. Rebecca found a serving dish and poured the sauce and chicken into it, stuck a large spoon in, and took it to the little-used table.

John mixed some butter into the pasta and brought it out in another dish, along with the plates, two glasses, and silverware. Rebecca went to grab the gallon of water from the fridge and poured the drinks as John set the table.

In the background, another 21st century song played, and this one had John thinking. A chorus of females sang, "Step by step, heart to heart, left right left, we all fall downâ€| Like toy soldiersâ€| Bit by bit, torn apart, we never win, but the battle wages on for toy soldiersâ€|"

So true, he thought, pulling out Rebecca's chair for her. She sat down with a grin and waited for him to sit down as well before serving herself and then passing him the dishes.

A man started rapping. John didn't like that type of music, but the words caught him. "I'm supposed to be the soldier who never blows his composure, even though I hold the weight of the whole world on my shoulders I am never s'posed to show it, my crew ain't s'posed to know it, even if it means goin' toe to toe with a Benzino, it don't matter. I'd never drag them in battles that I can handle 'less I absolutely have to. I'm s'posed to set an example, I need to be the leader, my crew looks for me to guide 'emâ€|"

John stopped listening as it turned to a rap battle. But the words touched him and he mentally stored them to think about later. He ate slowly, though he finished before Rebecca. They chatted about little things, teasing each other occasionally, as they cleaned up, John telling Rebecca repeatedly to leave the dishes for him to clean. She gave in finally and said goodbye, taking Chichi and going back to her house.

John felt the silence descend, even though the TV was still playing oldies. The house suddenly seemed deserted. He sighed and went upstairs after turning off the TV and lights. He lay on the bed, staring at the ceiling, confused. His house was the same; it wasn't any bigger just because Rebecca had left. Yet it felt like it had emptied completely; he felt lonely, and blinked. He was often lonely in the military when separated from his Spartans. But this was different.

John pushed it from his mind, turned onto his side, and ordered himself to sleep.

10. The Field Trip

_Please note: I apologize in advance for (and for past) cheesiness. I'm still working on writing anything except science-related and/or argumentative papers. Also, minor cussing ahead. _

Please do review! I really appreciate it and tend to upload fasterâ€¦ Since this is already written, hint hint, I could literally post the entire story right now but I'm drawing it out in hopes to improve upon my writing as I go, with your help! (Also, any AU-ness is pretty much intentionalâ€¦ You'll see. I had to have John alone. And that is not in a naughty wayâ€¦ I wish.)

****Chapter 9 - The Field Trip****

John knocked at the door; Rebecca opened it quickly, greeting him with a grin. "They'll be here any minute. I've got to shower; the animals are all groomed already."

"You've been busy," John noted. "I'll get them assembled, then."

"You are a gem!" Rebecca zoomed back into the house to shower and change. John had dressed simply in a white T-shirt and blue jeans, wearing his hiking boots. He waiting, hands folded behind his back and Chichi sitting next to him, for the bus that would be carrying almost fifty children to Rebecca's farm.

The roads had been plowed and salted; the field trip had almost been canceled, but Rebecca assured the bus driver that the road wasn't snowed in at all, thanks to the plow team, and promised that the kids would have a wonderful time. So, they were coming.

The bus rumbled into the clearing in front of the house and stopped just in front of John. He waved; the bus driver grinned and opened the door with a loud pneumatic hiss. "Alright, everyone out!"

The children descended like a wave, shrieking, laughing, jostling each other in their rush to escape the big yellow vehicle. They looked to be around ten years old. John blinked. It was all so undisciplined. Two teachers were with the crowd, obviously trying to take a head count. John waved them over; the pair approached carefully, still watching the kids.

"I'm Star," the elderly one said, her quiet brown eyes scanning the crowd. "This is Jenny. We're the fifth grade teachers. Hold on,

Sammy's trying to eat something again!" She hurried off towards a young girl trying to eat dirt, her white hair bouncing as she knelt and scolded the child.

Jenny grinned slightly as she tried to count, her pale green eyes darting back and forth, her blonde hair flying away from her scalp in wisps. John leaned closer and murmured, "There are fifty seven, Miss Jenny."

"Oh!" She squeaked and turned around; she blinked when she saw him. "Oh, thank you, Mr.?"

"John," he said, offering his hand. "I'm helping Rebecca. She's inside; she'll join us in a minute."

"Oh, good." She shook his hand quickly and pulled away, obviously a little intimidated.

"Over here, everyone," John called, motioning for the kids to walk towards him. They came slowly, some shoving and pushing, other laughing together, some stragglers at the back obviously listening to something through the tiny white earbuds in their ears.

The kids looked up at him; some gasped and the whispering started. John grimaced mentally. "Come on, everyone in the back. Let's get out of the way of the bus." He herded the children towards the barn where the tour would start. The bus parked off to the side and then the driver climbed out to join the field trip.

"Alright, everyone, listen up. This is Mr. John, who'll be one our tour guides today. Everyone say hello," Jenny instructed the mass of children.

"Hello," they chorused. John smiled and waved.

"Miss Rebecca will be joining us soon. Does everyone have their buddy?" There was some shuffling as each kid paired up with another one. "Anyone missing?" Everyone answered in the negative. "Alright, then. Listen up. There may be a quiz on this!" There were a few collective groans.

John stepped forward and cleared his throat. The children were silent, watching him with a mixture of fear and awe. "Good morning, children," he said. "I'm Mr. Leonidas, but you can just call me John. I help Rebecca with the animals you're going to meet today."

A hand shot up in the back of the crowd; John nodded to the girl attached to it. "Aren't you the Spartan?" she asked.

John nodded. "I was Spartan-117," he said. "But, please, no more questions about that. You are here to learn about animals and farming, not war."

"But it's much more fun," a boy in the front whined. John shook his head slightly.

"Does anyone know why farming is so important?" he asked the crowd of children, attempting to pull the attention back to the topic at hand.

Another little boy raised his hand. Jenny motioned for him to answer. "'Cuz it feeds us!" he said proudly.

"Very good. It provides food. Anything else?"

"Ummmâ€¦" The boy shook his head in confusion.

Another little girl yelled, "It keeps real live animals around!"

"Good," John said, smiling. "Has anyone been to a zoo?" Most of the hands went up. "Zoos are mainly for the conservation of animals. That means they keep them to study and learn about. Farms, though, are all about working animals."

"Like horses plowing?" a boy interrupted.

"Yes," John answered with a smile. "But these horses here don't plow. This farm functions mostly as a goat milk and cheese farm, though we also raise pigs for meat and showing. Does anyone have a pet at home?" Many hands shot up eagerly. "Anyone have a dog?" A few hands went down. "This is Chichi." Chichi woofed at her name; the children giggled. "She works on the farm just like me. She helps keep track of the goats and pulls things when we need help."

Rebecca walked towards them; John smiled and introduced her to the crowd of children, who yelled enthusiastically when she asked if they were ready to see a real horse. John had learned that real animals â€" not clones or holograms â€" were rare, and seeing a real one was a treat. Zoos tended not to have petting zoos, so it was a treat for the children to get to pet real living animals.

"Alright, everyone, follow me," Rebecca instructed, heading for the barn. John let the children wander past him, many looking up at him and whispering, and then fell in line at the back to keep any strays from wandering away.

A little girl walked up to his side and reached up, tugging on his hand. John looked down and smiled at her. "Hello. What's your name?"

"Betty," she said. "But Becky calls me Bettunia."

John blinked. "You're Bettunia?"

"Uh huh," she said. "Are you John from Victoria?"

John nodded, his throat suddenly dry. "Yes," he said quietly.

"Where's Kelly? She was nice."

"Kelly's not here," he said quietly. "She's busy."

"Aw. Tell her thank you when you see her, okay?" Betty asked, grabbing his hand.

"I will," John murmured. _If I get to see her again,_ he added mentally.

"And thank you," Betty added, hugging his leg. John stopped so he didn't shake her. "You saved my life."

"You're welcome." John gently pulled her off and crouched. "I'm glad you look like you're doing well." It sounded lame, but she giggled and threw her arms around his neck, hugging him tightly.

"You don't look so scary without your big green stuff," she whispered.

John chuckled. "My armor is pretty scary, isn't it?"

"I think it's good. I hope it scared all those Covenant!"

John smiled. "It did," he assured her. "Now, you'd better catch up with everyone. The tour's starting."

"Okay. Bye, John!" She raced away and John stood, smiling slightly.

Kelly, if only you were hereâ€| John thought to himself, sighing as he followed the children, his long legs quickly catching up just as Rebecca started talking about the goats. The children went into the goat pen five at a time to pet the goats and feed them carrots. The goats were spoiled rotten by the time all sixty children had had a chance to feed them.

"And here, we have a horse. This is Miss Valentine." Rebecca stroked V's nose gently; the horse snorted at the children and they giggled. "She's my only mare. A mare is a female horse. We'll meet the boys â€" male horses are stallions â€" in a minute. But she's spoiled rotten. Aren't you?" The horse nodded its head, making the children laugh. They crowded around to pet V's soft muzzle and stroke her neck. Rebecca and Miss Valentine had rehearsed that trick several times.

John went to the stallion's pen and clipped a lead rope to Lover Boy's halter, who whickered softly and nudged him for a treat. John smiled and murmured, "Only if you behave." Lover Boy eyed him and sighed, ears flicking. John clipped a lead rope to Rose Red's halter as well.

John opened the gate and led Lover Boy and Rose Red into the pasture behind the barn, where he ground-tied them with a word and waited for Rebecca to lead the children out of the barn. They said hello to the pigs first, though, and the pigs squealed happily when Rebecca tossed a handful of grains into each of their dishes.

"And out here, we have a little treat for you," Rebecca was saying as she and the children, followed by the teachers and bus driver, exited the barn. "This is Lover Boy on the left and Rose Red on the right. They're my stallions. Does anyone remember what that means?"

"A boy horse!" a boy shouted.

"Good, Jimmy. Exactly. These two are male horses. Would anyone like to ride one?"

There was a chorus of "Me! Me! Me!" as the children surged forward. Rebecca chuckled, called two by name, and they ran forward to pet the

stallions' noses eagerly. John lifted each onto the back of a horse easily, showed them how to hold onto the mane, and then led the pair around in a slow circle.

All of the children eventually decided to try riding a horse by the time noon started to roll around. Some of the more timid ones took a little peer pressure to get on the horse, but everyone loved it. For those who looked timid, John made sure to stay between the horses so he could catch anyone who fell off. No one did, though, and John took the stallions back to the barn for a good treat while Rebecca led everyone into the greenhouse.

John fed and watered the stallions and then joined the children as they finished the tour of the greenhouse and went to the pasture again to sit and eat their lunch. John joined them, watching as Rebecca, the teachers, and the bus driver milled through the seated children, making sure everyone got a lunch and escorting kids to the bathroom in groups of two or three.

"John?"

John looked down to see Betty smiling up at him. "Yes, Bettunia?"

She scrunched up her nose. "Betty. Bettunia's a silly name."

"Betty, then. How can I help you?"

"Ummmâ€¦ I was wonderin' if I could have a piggy back ride," she said all in a rush. John blinked. "You know, like when we played that game with Kelly?"

"Ohâ€¦" He smiled slightly. "Did you like that?"

"Uh huh! You run fast!"

John chuckled slightly. "Only if your teachers say it's okay."

Betty giggled and ran off to find Star. The elderly teacher glanced at John and nodded; he tilted his head in acknowledgement. Betty ran into his leg and hung on there like a barnacle. "Up, up, up!" she demanded.

John laughed and picked her up, setting her over his back. "Hang on tight, now," he said. She wrapped her arms around his neck and squeezed, but it didn't bother the big man.

Starting slowly, he ran towards the end of the pasture and steadily increased his speed. Betty giggled in his ear as he changed his stride into the fast sprint he usually only used to avoid plasma. "Wheeee!" she cried. John turned in a big circle and slowed as he approached the group of children. Betty giggled as he crouched and slid off his back, laughing happily as she raced to join her friends. John stood and smiled, not even breathing hard. It felt good to run, especially since it had been just to make a little girl happy.

"Me next!"

John looked down; a boy was grinning up at him, latched onto his leg. Idly, John wondered if all children were part barnacle. He reached

down and picked the child up carefully. "What's your name?" he asked.

"Jimmy!"

"Hold on, Jimmy." John let the child ride on his shoulders and turned around, repeating the run he had just made. Jimmy laughed in his ear, saying something about flying. John returned to the group and let him down; Jimmy grinned, thanked him, and ran off to finish his lunch.

A small group gathered, clamoring for a piggy back ride themselves. John gave each one a ride, sometimes two at a time, learning their names. By the time he had run back and forth a couple dozen times, he was feeling it. He chuckled as he breathed deeply. It felt good to work hard, especially since it was making the children so happy.

"How come you're so fast?" a boy asked. John had finished the last run and sat on the grass, folding his long legs under himself carefully. Betty promptly sat on his lap; he smiled and tousled her hair gently.

"I practiced a lot," John answered the boy, named Carter. "I ran every day, farther and farther and faster and faster."

"You're like Superman," Jimmy piped up. The children were sitting around him, their lunches done. The teachers looked grateful for a respite and ran off to use the restrooms themselves.

John smiled slightly. "Well, I'm not bulletproof," he chuckled. "And I can't fly unless someone throws me really far." The children giggled.

"Why are you so scarred?" June, a young girl, asked, completely oblivious to the rules of polite questions.

John thought for a moment and then smiled softly at her. "Because of the war," he answered. "Protecting people like you, and Betty, and the soldiers with me."

"So you're like a guardian angel?" Carter asked. His big brown eyes were filled with awe.

John shook his head. "No, nothing like that. I justâ€¦ It was my job to protect you all."

Betty wiggled. "He saved me on Victoria. Him and another Spartan. Her name was Kelly. They ran so fast and we had to keep up and get to the ship so they could bring us here," she babbled, apparently comfortable with the story. "He killed a whole bunch of Covenant! Lots and lots!"

"What was the war like?" a boy asked. He was quiet, John had noticed, and very shy, keeping his eyes pinned on the ground. His name was John, too.

John shook his head slightly. "I hope you all never have to find out. It was terrible. How many of you lost friends and family?" Everyone raised their hand. "See? War is never the answer."

"Will the Covenant attack Earth again?" a girl, Vicky, asked. She twisted a lock of golden hair in one hand nervously.

"No," John answered. "We are allied with the Sangheili â€" the Elites."

"Those squid-heads killed millions of humans!" Carter objected loudly, blue eyes flashing angrily.

"Yes, the Elites killed many humans. But they also saved us, in the end. And they are working with us now to destroy what remains of the Covenant."

"They should all die," Carter muttered rebelliously, crossing his arms stubbornly.

"If there were no Elites, I wouldn't be here," John said quietly. "Thel 'Vadam, the Arbiter, rescued me from a ship. He is one of my best friends now, and he is working to make the human-Elite alliance a reality."

"Is it true that Grunts breathe methane?" April asked, clearly trying to change the subject. She was a precocious child, John decided; her deep green eyes and dark black hair coupled with nearly flawless skin marked her for a future beauty as well.

"Yes," John answered, smiling slightly. "They carry packs of methane on their backs. Without them, they suffocate."

"I bet they make a big boom, too," Lizzy giggled, idly flicking a stray strand of bleached blonde hair out of her face. John nodded slightly.

"Tell us about the war!" Marissa demanded, overriding Lizzy with her loud voice and dominating personality. "How many Covenant did you kill?"

"That is not something you should be thinking about," John said sternly. "You have your whole lives ahead of you. Take it from an old man; don't let fighting be your answer to everything. We've got brains, so use them." He tapped Betty's skull gently; she giggled. "Humanity needs every single one of us to survive and rebuild."

"When will we go back to the glassed planets?" Betty asked, twisting in his lap to look up at John, her hazel eyes quiet. The former Spartan shook his head.

"I don't know if we will, Betty. We'll find new ones. You will be in charge of that," he said, looking at every child. "It won't take long for us to outgrow Earth again, and then â€" if you decide to be an astrophysicist or engineer â€" you will be responsible for finding new worlds to cultivate and terraform."

"I wanna be a scientist when I grow up," June declared. "I wanna raise goats and feed everyone goat cheese! It's yummy!" She opened her mouth and licked her lips, rubbing her stomach, her grey eyes twinkling with laughter.

"That's silly," Carter huffed. "I'm gonna be a Helljumper, like Luke!"

And I'll go on secret missions and kick butt!"

"You're just a boy," Marissa teased. "You're so skinny they'll use you to unclog the toilets!"

Carter growled and turned red. "Yeah, well, what're you gonna do, fatso?" he yelled. "They'll use you as a MAC round."

Marissa gasped, tears coming to her eyes. John frowned at Carter. "Carter," he said seriously. "Apologize to Marissa." Carter folded his arms and muttered. "Louder."

"Fine! Sorry!" he yelled at Marissa. "But you are fat," he muttered rebelliously. John wouldn't have heard it except for his augmented hearing.

"Carter, do you know why the ODS'Ts are so good at what they do?" John asked. Carter shook his head, looking a little fearful as the Spartan focused his entire attention on the boy. "They're part of a team, and a team has to trust each other. If Marissa was in your squad, would she trust you to have her back during a fight?"

"No," Carter muttered, staring at his feet.

"Would you like to be left alone without someone watching your back?"

"No."

"No, you don't. If you don't have something nice to say, don't say anything at all. You can think it; that is your right. But your right stops the moment you hurt someone else."

"Understood, sir." Carter looked at Marissa. "I'm sorry, Marissa."

"It's okay," she said, looking at her feet.

"Where is your team?" John the child asked after a few awkward moments of silence.

John the Spartan blinked slightly, then glanced at the sky. "Most of my brothers and sisters died in the war," he said softly. "Some are still missing."

"I thought Spartans didn't die," June said, confused.

"We do," he said. "We're human, just like you. But the military said we couldn't be listed as dead to maintain the illusion that we were invincible."

"Are they really your brothers and sisters?" April asked.

John nodded. "Not by blood, but we grew up together. They were my family."

"I lost my family, too," April said quietly. "Betty's granddaddy took me in, though. I'm lucky. I didn't like the orphanage."

"I'm sorry to hear that," John said, patting her shoulder.

"My mommy was a pilot," Rod said, smiling proudly though his light green eyes were moist. "She flew Pelicans. She was a hero."

"My daddy was a pilot, too," April murmured. "He got hurt and sent home. He can't walk now, but he's alive, and we always thank the gods for that."

"My uncle was a Marine."

"My big sister was a Helljumper."

"My dad was, too. He dropped too fast, though, and died on impact."

"My Opa was a captain. He died with his ship."

"Mine was an LT in the Navy. He died on Reach."

"My mommy was on Victoria," Betty said. "And my daddy."

"My daddy was on Eridanus II."

The children were silent for a moment, remembering their friends and family who had died.

"It is important to remember to be grateful for what we do have," John said quietly. "And remember, our family and friends are always in our hearts."

"What are you grateful for?" Betty asked, looking up.

John thought for a moment. "I'm alive," he said quietly. "I survived and I hope I can help now in creating things rather than destroying them. I have great friends; Rebecca, Luke, Thelâ€¦ I got to meet you all." The children giggled.

"Alright, kids, time to go!" Star and Jenny yelled together from the barn. The children whined and slowly stood up. "Hop to it, younglings! We have to get back."

John carried Betty over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes, to her delight. Two children hung on his arm; another pair latched onto his legs. He was very careful as he walked towards the end of the pasture with the precious cargo. Rebecca laughed as the children dog-piled the Spartan with a group hug.

As they loaded back into the bus, John and Rebecca waved goodbye. Jenny counted as they entered, smiled with relief when the total ended up to be fifty seven again, and waved before entering and pulling the door closed. The bus started with a rumble and backed up, turned, and headed out the driveway.

Rebecca grinned at John. "See, I told you."

John raised his hands in surrender. "I never disputed it," he reminded her. "A woman is always right."

"Hmph. Be sure you keep that attitude, mister." John chuckled. "Lunch?"

"Sounds wonderful. Being a human horse worked up an appetite."

Rebecca laughed and led the way into the house, where Chichi was sleeping on the couch. "I think that went rather well. I hope they enjoyed the tour."

"I think they did," John remarked with a smile. "Can I help with lunch?"

"Sure, want to go put on some tunes first, though?"

"Sure." John went to the music player and turned it on, selected country – a genre both he and Rebecca enjoyed- and turned the speakers down a little. Rebecca hummed along, dancing a few steps as she moved back and forth through the kitchen.

Rebecca swayed to the slow music as she arranged several sandwiches. John grinned as she moved to the fridge, bent down to get ham and cheese from the drawer, and swung her hips to the beat.

"Quit staring at my ass," she snapped, laughing, as she closed the fridge.

John chuckled and shook his head. "I wasn't."

"That's what they always say. You don't have to be ashamed. I have a sexy ass." She wiggled, chuckled, and stilled for a moment to carefully slice up the ham and cheese.

John laughed. "If you don't say so yourself."

"But I did," she reminded him with a grin. John rolled his eyes slightly, still smirking. "Now, admit that my ass is sexy."

"Alright, you have an attractive posterior."

"Thanks," she said sarcastically, snorting in amusement. "You could make a drop-dead beauty sound like a homely farmer's wife."

John shrugged. "Beauty is only skin-deep."

"Hmm. Wise words, for a man."

"Thank you," he sniffed.

The music changed and Rebecca jumped, grinned, and grabbed John's hand. "Dance with me!" she ordered, pulling him into the living room.

"I've never-

"Just feel the beat, John," she instructed, spinning and raising her hands. "I'll lead," she said, grabbing his hands and putting one on the small of her back, the other in her hand. She rested her hand on his upper arm and stepped back. John moved smoothly with her as they swayed to the slow song.

"I feel silly," he murmured after a moment, finding something even a graceful Spartan wasn't equipped to do.

Rebecca giggled and looked up at him. "At least you aren't stepping on my toes."

"True," he chuckled.

"I danced this at my wedding," she said softly. John blinked; he had seen the pale ring of flesh on her ring finger but didn't realize it meant she had been married. Or was still? It confused him. "It's my favorite song in the whole world."

John listened to the music for a moment. It was talking about being a Cinderella, a princess of some sort, he gathered. "You are a Cinderella," he remarked casually.

Rebecca shook her head. "Yeah, wellâ€¦ My Prince Charming wasn't all he was cracked up to be," she said bitterly. "He ran off with another woman a year ago. But I'm over it."

"I'm sorry," John said, at a loss. Rebecca shook her head.

"My dad warned me, butâ€¦ Oh, here I go again, ruining the mood." She sighed and stopped; John gently pulled her into a hug impulsively. She leaned into his chest, sniffing slightly. "Sorry," she mumbled into his shirt.

"Shhh," he said. She pulled back slightly and John let her go, wiping a tear from her eye with a careful finger. Rebecca smiled at him.

"Thanks," she said quietly. "You're so good to me."

John smiled. "It's my turn to take care of you," he told her, leading her into the kitchen. He put out the plate of sandwiches and started a kettle of hot water.

Rebecca nibbled at a sandwich as John waited for the water to boil and then brought her a cup of hot chocolate. He watched her sip it for moment and then moved around behind her and gently rubbed her shoulders. Rebecca hummed softly in approval and bent her head forward; John took the hint and massaged her neck as well.

"I didn't know you had a talent for this," she murmured.

"Wearing half a ton of armor all day made us sore in the beginning," he said quietly. "We spent hours massaging each other. Of course," he snickered, "we were usually left alone after getting out of the armor."

Rebecca blinked. "Huh?"

"We don't wear clothes under the armor," John explained. "And we were never concerned with being naked, so we would stay that way while we worked out the kinks and sparred, sometimes."

Rebecca blushed; she couldn't imagine getting naked with a couple dozen men and women. "You must have been really comfortable with your bodies."

"It helped that each one of us were pretty much the same. We were all muscle. There was nothing to be ashamed of. Nothing erotic, either. It was simply because it was more difficult to assess injuries when clothed, and easier to spot and work out knots. And sometimes, being free of everything and feeling the air on our skin felt good. Towards the end, I was so used to being suited up that feeling the air on my skin wasn't so craved. I was too used to being sucked into a gel layer."

"Huh."

"One time, this poor Marine had been sent to fetch me from our barracks. We had just gotten out of our armor, as naked as the day we were born, and he just walks right in. Linda was working out a knot in my back, kneeling on me. Kelly and James were sparring; he had her in a head-lock, and I have to admit, the pose did look ratherâ€¦ Compromising. Anyway, the Marine blushed so much I was worried about his blood pressure." John smiled; she could hear it in his voice. "Kelly, bless her soul, walked right up to him. And Kelly's just tall enough that his eyes are staring _right_ at her breasts, and she was one of the curviest Spartans, if you catch my drift. She asked him, calm as you please, what he needed. He stammered something about the captain wanting me and fled. We all laughed about that, but I had to get dressed and up to the command post."

"And there were still rumors that you all were robots?" Rebecca murmured, dozing with the pleasant sensation of John's strong hands gently easing knots in her deep tissue.

"I don't think he told anyone," John chuckled. "Poor guy looked pretty traumatized. We do look pretty imposing, and not entirely human, naked."

Rebecca snorted. "How many people see you naked that it's something you hear?"

John chuckled. "All of my Spartans. Dr. Halsey. Every technician who helped me into and out of my armor. Probably a dozen or so soldiers. The surgeons who augmented me and my fellow Spartans. It's more a question of who _hasn't_."

"You sound like a nudist," Rebecca commented with a chuckle. John tilted his head.

"I've learned my lesson over the years. One too many comments about a Spartan's augmentations enlarging everything. "

Rebecca blinked, then blushed and groaned. "Shut up, John."

"Yes, ma'am." He chuckled, deep and rich, and Rebecca couldn't help but imagine why people would stare at him. He was at least 20% bigger than the average human, after all, and there was no reasonâ€¦ She stopped that train of thought.

"Feeling better?" he asked as he moved to her lower back. Rebecca hummed an agreement. "Good."

"What time is it?"

"About four."

"Hm. I should get up and do something. I really should." Rebecca sounded like she was trying to convince herself.

"Or you can just sit here and relax," John offered.

"Mmmâ€¦ That would kind of be nice, but I always have to be doing something. Hmmm. Want to play a game of chess?"

John blinked. "I'm not that good at it, but yes, I'd love to play." He stepped back and Rebecca slithered off of the stool, grinning.

"My back feels amazing. You're amazing. Thank you."

"My pleasure," John chuckled, heading into the living room. He sat carefully on the couch as Rebecca dug deep into a cupboard and finally surfaced with an antique wooden chess set.

They set it up quickly, John remembering more about the game as he touched the pieces again. He had learned to play early in life, as part of his training on strategy and troop deployment.

"You go first," he offered. Rebecca surveyed the board and moved her knight out first. John quickly shifted a pawn up, freeing his rook. Eyeing his castle, Rebecca let her bishop free, setting it up to guard the horse. John formed a defensive line of pawns quickly as Rebecca scrambled her bishops and rooks to set up a grid around the king.

They traded blows, John taking Rebecca's queen and sacrificing his knight to do it. Rebecca was quickly losing, she saw, and watched carefully. John seemed to track every piece in his mind. He moved quickly, without hesitation, and never into the line of fire without a good reason. Within half an hour, her king was surrounded and knocked over.

"Good game," Rebecca chuckled. "And you said you weren't good."

"I'm used to playing against an AI," he said. "It's been years, though."

"I have a great game for us to play," she said, snapping her fingers and going back to the cupboard. She put the chess set away carefully and dug out a bag of chips. "Have you ever played poker?"

"Um, no," John said carefully. "The Marines used to, but we weren't invited to the games. We generally avoided the rec room altogether, actually."

"I'll teach you. Usually it's played for something â€" chips, tokens, real money, whatever â€" but we'll just play for fun, alright?"

"Sounds good to me." John concentrated on learning the rules and quickly started beating Rebecca in every hand. He called her bluffs easily.

Laughing as he destroyed her pathetic hand, Rebecca asked, "How do

you know I'm bluffing?"

"You get a gleam in your eye," John admitted.

"Why don't you have a tell?"

"Oh, I probably do. Maybe my toe wiggles." Rebecca glanced under the table at John's socks and he wiggled his big toe at her. Rebecca rolled her eyes at him.

"You do not."

"I guess I have a controlled face," he said, shrugging.

"Show me happy." John smiled. "Sad." John frowned. "No, that's frustrated. Sad." John thought for a moment and then pouted slightly. "Eh, that'll do. Angry." John's face instantly went ugly; Rebecca blinked. "Oh, you're good at that one, I see. Okay. Bored." His eyes danced with laughter but he adopted a neutral expression. "Dumb grunt." He stuck his tongue out of the side of his mouth and started drooling. Rebecca laughed. "That'll do." John chuckled and cleaned his chin off on the inside of his T-shirt. "Hmmm. Begging." John widened his eyes and batted his eyelids rapidly. "Wow. Puppy dog for the win. Okay, Mr. Uber-Control, show me love." John tilted his head.

"I don't know what that one looks or feels like," he admitted.

Rebecca blinked. "You've never loved someone?"

"Oh, I have. I love my brothers and sisters. But we never really had an emotional base for that. It was more like I trusted them with everything, and they trusted me. We called it love, but it was something a lot more— Anyway, not in the way you're thinking of."

"You're telling me that all the times you were naked in front of the ladies, they didn't throw themselves at you?" she teased.

"No," John said seriously. "Just looked and whispered. We are too different for intimate contact for most people, and more often than not, we didn't have time even if we were interested, which we aren't — our augmentations included hormones to suppress sexual drive. It was suit up, fight, get patched up, and get back on the ground."

"Oh— Sorry—" Rebecca rubbed the back of her neck awkwardly.

"Don't be. I never minded. I wasn't ever planning on being anything but a soldier."

"What about after the war?"

John was silent for a moment. "They never actually said it— But we weren't supposed to survive beyond our useful years. We were expected to die in combat, especially once we made contact with the Covenant."

Rebecca blinked, holding down a gasp. "That's terribleâ€¦ You're human beings."

John smiled darkly. "Barely."

"You walk like me, you talk like me, you breathe the same damn air and have the same physical structure â€" as close as expected between two genders â€" so you're human."

John flexed his arm. "Only because they engineered our genetics to retain the same basic shape. It would have been useful to grow another set of arms, or have a tail, but it wasn't possible with the technology at the time and would have taken a lot longer, too."

"Oh, Johnâ€¦"

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you."

"I'm not upsetâ€¦ Okay, I am. I think you're perfect just the way you are."

John cocked an eyebrow. "Scary Spartan and all?" he asked teasingly, but there was a serious undercurrent to his voice.

"Scary Spartan and all," Rebecca confirmed with a small smile.

"Hmm." John dealt the cards swiftly, his fingers surprisingly deft for someone so big. "What does love look like?"

Rebecca sighed and leaned back. "It doesn't have just one look. It's a lot of thingsâ€¦ And there's a lot of types of love. There's the love between a child and parent. The love between siblings, comrades, BFFs. The love between partners, between husband and wifeâ€¦"

"It seems like an extension of trust," John said quietly as he examined his cards.

"It is," Rebecca acknowledged. "But if someone breaks that trust, it's completely shatteredâ€¦ It feels like your heart dies and you don't know where to find it again. And then, sometimes, if you're really lucky, it suddenly starts beating again, and it fills you with this wonderful feeling that maybe everything will be okay. That maybe it wasn't your fault, or perhaps it was meant to be."

John was silent for a moment, thoughtfully staring at his cards blindly. Rebecca exhaled and then shook her head. "But while it lasts, love is amazing. It's as intricate as any battlefield. You defend yourself and your partnerâ€¦ You face foes â€" your daddy if you're young, your brother otherwiseâ€¦ Your mom calling to make sure you're okayâ€¦" She smiled softly, fondly.

John hummed slightly. "It sounds like something civilians would do," he offered stoically.

Rebecca glanced at the Spartan. "Plenty of professional soldiers have personal lives, too. Admiral Hood has a wife and baby on the way. The 'Vadam has a family."

The large man chuckled and casually set his cards down. "Admiral Hood

warned me not to wait to start my life," he explained. "You have the same tone."

The smaller woman bounced her eyebrows suggestively, grinning. "The admiral is a wise man. Every person needs love and someone in their life."

"You seem to be doing well," John pointed out quickly. He immediately saw the pain in Rebecca's eyes and clenched his jaw. _Great, John, did it again_

Rebecca shook off his apology gently. "I've had some amazing people in my life looking out for me," she admitted. "And having you need someone these past few weeks_ Has definitely helped. I'm not happy if I'm not caring for something or someone. That's why I raise animals _" they need me, and I need them."

The large man tilted his head slightly, and the woman knew he understood her perfectly. "You have a purpose when you're caring for something," he said quietly.

Rebecca nodded. "Exactly. Like you had humanity to watch over, and your Spartans."

"And look how well that went over," John said with a slight growl.

"Their deaths and absences aren't your fault," Rebecca scolded. "You didn't force them into the Spartan program. They didn't have a choice, but you didn't force them." John tilted his head slightly, reminding Rebecca of a puppy in the way he watched her. "What you need is something to do. Something productive. And more than just helping me on the farm. You spend too much time holed up in your house. Do something _" pick up a hobby other than weight lifting. Go find yourself a date. Hell, go to a _bar_ and just hang out. You need more friends than just me. I'm too eccentric to give you an idea of what humans are like."

John chuckled softly. "I don't think you want to see me drunk," he admitted. "I'd be dangerous."

"Good point," she allowed thoughtfully. "Fine. Then I'm going to officially teach you the art of courting a mate!" John just raised an eyebrow slowly, which made Rebecca snicker. "Don't give me sexual drive oppression or any nonsense like that. You're forty and I'm willing to bet you're a virgin."

John shrugged mysteriously; Rebecca eyed him. "Alright, alright, you win," he admitted, holding up his hands. "But I don't particularly think I want to court anyone_"

"You can at least learn the moves! You take things too literally, for one. You need to learn not to tell people certain things. Like being naked in your MJOLNIR suit. That just_ Kind of ruins the whole "mysterious Spartan in the suit kicking ass" vibe."

Once again, the Spartan tilted his head. "Then I suppose I should learn."

Rebecca nodded. "Good man." She leaned forward and grabbed the

remote, turning on a movie. "This is called a movie date. It's the first step in a new relationship," she said, grinning as she stood up. "And popcorn is a necessity." John followed her into the kitchen where she grabbed a pair of bowls, two bags of instant popcorn, and stuffed them in the microwave.

"And rice krispie treats. Marshy-mallows, where are you?" Rebecca called, digging through her pantry. "Come out, come out, wherever you are." She exclaimed and then pulled a big bag of puffy white clouds from her pantry. "Here we go."

John glanced at the microwave as it popped suddenly and then nearly exploded with rapid-fire bursts. He leaned down to look in the window. "That'sâ€¦ A very violent food."

Rebecca giggled. "Pop-corn. It's corn and then you pop it. And then you put butter and salt on it and feed it to me."

"Hmm." John opened the door when the microwave dinged. He breathed in the smell of popped corn and ate a piece experimentally. "It's pretty good."

"Spray it with this," she said, tossing him a small bottle. "For butter flavor."

"Yes, ma'am." He quickly coated the popcorn, tossing it in the bowl to get under the top kernels. Rebecca shooed him away from the microwave and put in a new bowl of marshmallows.

"Yum yum yum yum," she chanted under her breath as she mixed rice cereal and chocolate chips together. John watched the marshmallows grow to be almost three times their original size before the microwave stopped, and then he delivered the hot bowl to Rebecca. She scooped the cereal, chocolate, and marshmallows together, pressed it into a pan, and led the way back to the living room. "Got that?" she asked, pointing to the pan. "Any woman you woo will love it if you can cook. Just don't do anything that actually involves cooking and you'll be in the green," the woman said teasingly.

"That wounds me," John told her gravely, grinning.

"You poor thing." There was no sympathy in her voice, but her eyes laughed all the same.

"Is that ice I hear forming?" The Spartan smirked, and Rebecca blinked. The timing, the toneâ€¦ John had a hidden talent, it seemed.

"What to watch, what to watchâ€¦" She scanned the digital menu and squeaked happily when she found a movie she liked. John smiled and sat down, carefully balancing the full bowls of popcorn as Rebecca flopped next to him and snatched a bowl of popcorn with a grateful sigh, leaning back into the cushions. She sat a little closer to John than normal, though he didn't seem to register the difference.

The movie began playing. It was something about a pair of girls moving into a new colony and bringing with them a set of pre-conceived notions of what life should be like. However, when their parents cut them off from their money, they had to get jobs. _Oh, the horror,_ John thought sarcastically.

John thought the whole thing rather trivial and shallow, but Rebecca enjoyed the movie. Half-way through, she leaned forward to grab the rice krispie treats and began picking the layer apart with her fingers. She told John to watch closely as she carefully formed little faces with the treats. "There, see? Artistic rice krispie treats!" she declared as though she had reinvented SlipSpace travel. She popped a smiley-face into her mouth and held out one that looked like it was trying to pass a rather painful bowel movement to John.

He accepted it carefully and nibbled on a side experimentally. Rebecca glared and he stopped instantly. "All at once or it's not the same!" she scolded. John obediently copied her popping movement and stuffed it into his cheeks, where it began gluing his teeth together. He blinked and chewed hesitantly. "Bonus â€" if you're ever with a chatty person, feed them a super-compact one and they'll shut up for a while."

John grunted as his jaws worked the piece over and beat it into submission. He moved the individual pieces around with his tongue, storing one in both cheeks and then breaking down the last third into more manageable chunks. Rebecca watched him, a sort of fascination on her face.

"That is ridiculously cute," she said once he had managed to get all of the treat down. "You looked like a chipmunk."

John raised an eyebrow. "I think I'll stick to nibbling next time." The woman shrugged and popped another rice krispie treat into her mouth; John stuck to the popcorn, though he disliked the way they clung to his teeth. His tongue made quick work of them, but it was still unpleasant.

When the movie ended, with the girls having successfully become rich again after inventing a new line of fashion, Rebecca told John to pick one. John didn't know any of the movies and so read the descriptions. He decided on one similar to the one they had just watched, since Rebecca had liked it.

Rebecca fell asleep on his arm half-way through the second movie, snuggled into his side with one hand tucked under her chin. The popcorn bowls â€" empty now â€" and rice krispie pan were on the floor where Chichi had successfully shined them. John turned off the TV and sat there for a moment, sorting through all the emotions he was experiencing.

He was happy â€" purely happy, without any dampening to it like he was used to. He felt free to express that happiness, and smiled softly as he smoothed Rebecca's hair down, tucking a strand behind her ear. She murmured and held onto him like a great big teddy bear.

He was also a little cautious. He hadn't been nervous almost his entire life, but then, he hadn't done anything like this. John knew how to assess a battle field and how best to deploy himself and whatever troops were nearby under his orders to best combat the enemy. Now, though, there was no enemy and John wasn't quite sure how to proceed. It was as though he was put on a foreign planet with no knowledge of the terrain, no weapons, and no clue. It was worse,

really, because he knew what to do in that situation; secure a base and begin searching for human life.

Now he was trying to learn a new set of skills. Honestly, he had no interest in learning how to court a partner. He wasn't even sure if he wanted a partner at all. He missed his Spartans at moments like these â€" Kelly would certainly have something useful to distract him with, even if it was just to tackle him into submission. Linda would make an observation that would completely change his view. Sam would tell him to get over it and get his ass back in line.

John had always been a guardian, but as he gazed at the woman by his side, he felt a surge of protectiveness. He never wanted her to be hurt again. She wasn't delicate by any means, but there was a certain fragility about her that he wanted to preserve. In her own way, in fact, she was stronger than he was. If he couldn't protect humanity from the Covenant, though, how could he hope to protect her from himself?

Had they been switched, John didn't think he could have done everything Rebecca had for him. He was a loner by both upbringing and choice. John carefully shifted in order to pull Rebecca slightly further onto his chest and then slowly stood up, picking her up with him. She was light in his arms and snuggled against his chest as he carefully made his way into her bedroom.

With one hand, he pulled back the covers and carefully lay Rebecca on the sheets. She rolled onto her stomach and muttered something about sharks; John smiled and pulled the covers up to her chin. Chichi watched silently before hopping up onto the bed and lying down next to her owner, panting dog-breath at John, who smiled, patted her head, and went out, closing the door behind him.

He made his way back to his house in the dark, opening the front door silently. He had noticed fresh tracks in the driveway but figured someone â€" probably Luke â€" had come calling and found him absent. John hung up his jacket and took off his shoes, went to the bedroom in the dark, and quickly stripped, preoccupied.

John lay down under the covers, pulled them up to his chest, and put his hands behind his head, staring at the ceiling. He drifted off slowly, Rebecca's words about love playing through his head.

11. Camera Crusher

****Chapter 10 â€" Cameras Were Made for Crushing****

John woke to the sound of gravel crunching in his driveway, which he had plowed recently. The heavy snowstorm yesterday had been out of character for mid-winter, Rebecca had said, worried about what such a fall could mean for the summer. They had been slowly spending more time together, talking, laughing, sharing secrets. She had been teaching him well enough that Rebecca decided it was time to introduce him to the real world, slowly â€" tonight, they were going to Monty for a movie.

John slipped out of bed, naked, and crept to the window. Outside, a white van pulled up to his front door. John quickly slipped on a pair of shorts â€" supposed to be pajamas, really â€" and went

downstairs.

He opened the door just as a woman jumped out of the passenger side of the van, dressed in a thick jacket and tight jeans. She was wearing a heavy hat that covered her hair, and gloves over her hands. A man was standing at the back of the van, talking to someone inside.

"Can I help you?" John asked carefully, stepping onto the porch.

The woman whirled and her mouth opened in a slight "O" of surprise. "Peter! Get the camera!" she yelled at the man in the back of the van.

John felt his chest constrict and moved back involuntarily. "Turn it on, and I will crush it," he growled. His sleep had been plagued for the past few nights and he could feel the slight sluggishness in himself that meant he wasn't functioning at 100%.

The woman smirked at him. "That would be illegal, Mr. Leonidas." There was absolutely no remorse in her dark brown eyes as she stared at him, standing in the cold on his porch in his shorts, her gaze traveling up and down his body.

"Do you think I could possibly care?" John shot back, striding forward. He straightened his back and shoulders and frowned; the woman paled slightly. "Get off of my property."

"We're here as public servants, Mr. Leonidas. And it's public-private land. I am within my rights to be here, as you have no gate on your driveway nor other warning signs." A man hefting a camera approached them. John made a mental note to put up a gate. And a sign.

John passed the woman and intercepted Peter, grabbing the camera and keeping the lens away from his face and making good on his promise to crush the thing. He shook the debris from his hand and stalked back inside, furious.

"Did you see that?!" the woman demanded of her partner as though he could have possibly missed it. "You can't hide in there, John!" she screamed at the door. John snorted softly to himself. "Expect a suit to be filed immediately!"

Great, John grunted to himself. He glanced at his hand; he usually had better self-control than that. John sighed and went upstairs to get his cell phone from his pants pocket. He called Cortana first, after hesitating on Rebecca's contact.

"Good morning, John," Cortana said pleasantly.

John grunted, clearly not amused. "A reporter just showed up at my house."

"Oh, dear. Please tell me they didn't see you."

"Wellâ€¦ They didn't get me on camera." Cortana sighed in relief. "I crushed it."

"John!" Cortana groaned softly. "That's only going to make things worse."

"I lost control," he admitted.

"I would have, too," Cortana assured him. "Well, you can expect a suit to be filed to cover the cost of that camera, the cost of replacing it with a new one, the hours spent by their employees on filling out the proper paperwork, and any subsequent loss of revenue for the few hours they'll be without a camera."

John shook his head. "I don't care."

"You will because they'll probably drag you into public courtâ€¦ Where there will be more cameras than you can go after."

"Do you think the excuse that I've been trained to destroy threats will work?" John asked. He had used it before, when he was fourteen.

"I doubt it. The camera wasn't attacking anyone."

"Maybe not physicallyâ€¦" John grumbled. He crossed the kitchen and put on a pot of hot water to start boiling. "Oh, but I do have some good news."

"Oh?" Cortana asked, perking up.

"Mhm." Cortana didn't think she had ever heard that from John; she checked her memory banks just to be certain and, sure enough, she was correct. "Rebecca is teaching me the 'art of courting a woman.'"

Cortana processed that several times, running it through her statistics and ethics programs â€" and, for good measure, comparing the psychological and biological matches between the pair. "Well, well, wellâ€¦ That is quite exciting, isn't it?" she asked, giggling softly.

"Don't go playing matchmaker," John ordered. "She says I should get out there and find someone."

"Andâ€¦ She said nothing about that someone being her?" Cortana asked slyly.

"Cortana," John said warningly.

He could picture her holding her hands up, a smirk on her face. "You have as good a chance at reproduction with her as with any female I have DNA charts for."

"Cortana." John palmed his face. "She's a friend and my neighbor."

"Uh huh. You are aware of the physical act of sex that sometimes follows a date, right? Which is what you've probably been doing, even if she's using the old "I'm going to teach you how to court a woman" excuse."

"Cortana!"

"A girl has to ask," she said, a grin in her voice. "Please tell me

you've at least kissed someone before."

"Once," John grunted.

"Kelly?"

"Yeah. When we were kids."

"Ohhh, John broke orders," Cortana sang, chuckling. "Well, Rebecca has her job cut out for her. You're about as romantic as a bull."

"I'll have you know I have learned how to put her to bed without waking her up," John muttered.

"With or without you?" Cortana teased.

"You're just as bad as a Marine," John told her sternly.

"John, it's something you have to think about, if you are interested in starting an intimate relationship. You could seriously injure your partner in a number of ways."

"I know. But I'm not even close to getting that intimate with anyone," John assured his long-time friend.

"You may consider getting checked out," she told him. "I know you've never had sexual intercourse before, but--"

"How would you know that?" he asked, snorting. "For all you know, I was a stud before meeting you."

"Uh huh." Cortana didn't sound convinced. "As I was saying, before you so rudely interrupted me, you haven't had sex before, but you've had plenty of blood transfusions, and screening can miss some things that you could pass on. Besides, it'd be a good idea for you to see a doctor regularly anyway. You're bound to have some fairly major problems with muscles, bones, and organs later in your life."

"Most of them have been replaced," John remarked softly.

"Exactly. You know as well as I do that clones sometimes don't last as long as the originals. It's good practice anyway."

"I'll make an appointment," he agreed, making a mental note.

"Good boy. If you have any questions, you know you can always talk to me."

"You're an AI," John pointed out.

"Who happens to be a girl herself, and your friend, and knows all about you, your augmentations, and any complications they could make."

"You win," John sighed, grinning. "I will, if I have any questions. Goodbye, Cortana."

"Be good, John. Kiss the girl!" Cortana laughed as she terminated the call; John rolled his eyes and quickly dialed Rebecca's house

phone.

"Good morning," Rebecca said into the phone, clearly wide-awake and bushy-tailed.

"Good morning, Rebecca," John said. He blinked as his heart fluttered; could he be having health problems already?

"Oh! John! How are you?" Rebecca's voice warmed noticeably, sending a slight shiver through John's spine. The former Spartan wondered if he had left a window open somewhere.

"Well enough. I'm calling to warn you about a white van â€" it's a news van."

"Oh, no. Did they find you?"

"Yes. I crushed their camera," he admitted.

Rebecca sighed on the other end of the phone. "They'll probably file suit," she told him. "They always do. Scratch one of their precious reporters and they fine you for millions." Rebecca clearly didn't like the news people.

"Cortana and I already discussed it," he said. "I just wanted to let you know."

"Okay, thanks. Want to come over later?"

John grinned. "I'd like that. How about mid-afternoon?"

"Good for me. See you in a bit!"

"Okay. Goodbye." John hung up and put his cellphone on the counter. The water was boiling in the kettle; he could hear the steam escaping the nozzle. He had taken off the whistle because it was so loud it hurt his ears. He quickly poured himself a cup of tea and went upstairs to do his morning work-out.

He watched himself in the mirror as he worked out, making sure his form was perfect as he lifted weights, keeping his back straight, shoulders back, and feet shoulder-width apart. He was careful not to overdo it but wanted nothing more than to exhaust himself, fall asleep, and wake up with everything from this morning being a nightmare. Except Rebecca. If he was given a choice to go back to the UNSCâ€¦ He would take it, without hesitation, but he would miss her eccentricity and sense of humor. Not to mention, he'd miss working with her farm.

A knock on his front door broke John's concentration. He hadn't heard a vehicle pull up and frowned slightly, wiping the slight sheen of sweat from his face and looping the towel around his shoulders as he went downstairs. He opened the door to find a balding man with grey eyes in police uniform on his front porch.

"Sheriff," John said, tilting his head in a greeting.

"Hey, John. I got some bad news," Sheriff Tucker said, rubbing the back of his neck awkwardly. "That news van filed a complaint against you for harassment, property damage, and terrorism."

"Terrorism?" John snorted. "I just crushed the camera. It was minor property damage at best. They were the ones harassing me."

"They stayed on what is considered public-personal property," Tucker explained. "They were within their rights, as much as it galls me to say that. They're claiming you made threats and, to quote, 'acted in a manner that placed the crew members in danger or appearance thereof of loss of life, limb, or health.'"

"A threat, singular, and it wasn't against their persons. Only the camera." John sighed quietly. "What are they doing about it?"

"Well, they want me to arrest you."

John raised an eyebrow. "Isn't that a bit excessive?"

"I would say so, but I'm just the messenger. They went all the way to the top."

John glanced at his vehicle. "I'm guessing you want me to come with you."

"It'll take a few hours to fill out the forms and work them through the system. I'll hurry it along as quickly as I can, but you'll be home before dusk."

John shook his head slightly. "Alright. Please, come in. I need to get dressed."

"Sure thing." Tucker stepped inside after John and took off his hat. "I'm sorry I had to do this, John."

John shook his head, dismissing his apology. "I lost control."

"Is it true you crushed it with one hand?" Tucker asked.

John chuckled. "Easily. They don't build things like they used to."

"Amen to that. My car keeps dying on meâ€¦" Tucker muttered. John smiled slightly and headed upstairs for a quick shower and change of clothing. He called Rebecca on his way down and explained the situation; she was furious but let him off the hook for missing their appointment that afternoon.

He and Tucker went back outside once John made sure the house was dark and he locked the door behind them, just in case those reporters decided a little trespassing wasn't beneath them. John eyed the small sheriff vehicle with doubt, and Tucker caught his glance.

"If you want to drive yourself, I'll meet you at the police station," he said. "I trust you not to run."

"Thanks. I'd probably break something if I tried to get in there," John chuckled, going to his garage. He climbed into his 'Hog and followed the sheriff to town, thinking the whole way.

When they got to the police station, reporters were crowded on the small lawn in front of the courthouse across the street. They saw the

sheriff's car pull up and mobbed him immediately, demanding to know where John was.

John parked the 'Hog neatly in front of the courthouse and climbed out, eyeing the reporters. He decided that, next to Brutes, reporters were one of his most dangerous enemies. So he put on his neutral face and pushed through the crowd, ignored the yelled questions and requests for a comment.

Tucker escorted him inside and shut the door firmly in the face of the reporters, who milled about like Grunts without a leader. John scowled darkly and Tucker motioned for the big man to follow him.

They entered a room and Tucker slid behind a desk, handing John a sheaf of papers. "I had these ready already, after I heard that woman start screeching about you," he said with a smile. He handed John a pen. "Just fill them outâ€¦ Best as you can."

John nodded and sat down on the chair opposite Tucker. He leaned forward and started reading the incident report. He made a few corrections, including one to his actual height â€" the woman had listed it as "at least seven feet tall" â€" and initialed each one. He then signed the bottom, agreeing that the above incident was as close as he could remember it. And since his memory was perfect, it was exactly what happened. He hadn't yelled at the woman like she claimed. The report was extensive, seven pages of testimony from the woman, who turned out to be called Lacy Masters, and the man who had witnessed the "attack," named Peter Lichten. The third witness hadn't actually seen anyone; Kirt Buddle was in the back of the van when the incident occurred, but he heard the threat.

John handed the report back to Tucker, who checked it over and nodded. "I had a feeling she was exaggerating. But you are intimidating," he pointed out with a smile. John nodded and went back to his task.

Name. John put in "John Leonidas" in neat print. _Date of Birth_. John put "Ca. 2511". _Current place of residence_. _Occupation_. Height. Build. Eyes. Hair. Weight. Gender ID. Sexual orientation. MERPS personality. IQ. Ethnicity. Home planet and city. _He filled in everything he could, which was less than half of the information it requested, and it took nearly two hours.

He glanced up at the sheriff. "Are all these questions necessary?"

Tucker nodded. "It's so we can ID you. Call me old-fashioned, but I don't like those DNA banks."

"They're useful," John said, shrugging. "I don't know some of this stuff."

"Leave it blank. Not many 6'10" men around here, especially quite like you."

John nodded and handed him the forms. "Then I have filled it out to the best of my knowledge."

"Not even your DOB?" Tucker asked, raising an eyebrow.

"It's classified," John said quickly, not willing to admit he didn't know his birthday because he hadn't celebrated it since he had turned six.

"Well, nothing to be done about that. Alright, let's go see the judge."

John followed Tucker across the street to the courthouse, bowling through the reporters without concern for their precious cameras. He didn't break anything, but he might have stepped on a few toes.

"Hey, Judy!" Tucker called when they got in. The courthouse was quiet, but a woman yelled from down the hall for them to wait. They sat in the hallway on benches for almost an hour before a teenage girl left the office they waited outside of, crying quietly. An older man followed her, eyes dark.

"That's "Your Honor" to you, Tucker!" the woman from inside the office called, inviting them in.

Tucker chuckled. "That's Sheriff to you, ma'am," he retorted as he showed John inside. Inside, Judge Judy, a gentle-looking woman with light blue hair and yellow eyes " obviously colored contacts " motioned for him to be seated. Tucker stood by the door.

Judy fixed her cat-yellow eyes on John, who nodded in a simple greeting. "Well, Mr. Leonidas, I see you had a bit of an altercation with a camera this morning."

"It was very one-sided, Your Honor," John admitted.

"Indeed." Her eyes twinkled with laughter, but she continued seriously. "You have been brought in front of this excuse of a court to work out bail. The prosecutor attorney should be here any moment."

Just then, a man burst in, briefcase swinging. "I'm here, Your Honor," the man said, gasping, his greying brown hair sticking out at all angles from his head. "Just had to get through my clients," he explained. "I apologize for my tardiness."

Judy nodded and motioned for him to sit. "Mr. Leonidas, you have been properly Mirandized, correct?" John glanced at Tucker, who grinned sheepishly and shrugged. Judy speared the sheriff with a glare and turned back to the Spartan. "Basically, you have the right to an attorney, the right to silence, and the right to face your accuser."

"I understand, Your Honor. I will represent myself for the time being."

"We can appoint a public defender if you have need," she said.

"I don't need one," John said firmly. "If this goes beyond the jumped-up property damages, I will arrange for UNSC lawyers to defend myself and my interests."

The news station's reporter visibly swallowed. "But you're not part

of the UNSC," he said, grey eyes worried. "Not anymore." UNSC lawyers were notoriously good at getting what they wanted.

John glanced at him. "I still retain highly classified information. They would there to protect both me from being forced to perjure myself in a court of law due to a conflict of interests and against any more classified information leaving this office. Sir."

"Until then, though, you may represent yourself, Mr. Leonidas," the judge said quickly. "Now, prosecutor, what have you to say in regards to bail?"

"We would like to request surveillance by ankle cufflet and house arrest, ma'am. The defendant emotionally and mentally terrorized my clients on public-private property, a clear violation of their rights as granted by the Information Act of 2030. Additionally, he did extensive damage to the private property of the news station, a filming camera worth approximately \$40,000."

John hadn't known the damn thing was so expensive. When the judge turned to him, he spoke quietly. "I do not deny that I did destroy said camera," he started carefully. "I'll admit to that. However, I did not "terrorize" anyone. My height and build are direct results of my training and augmentations, and I was built to be intimidating. Therefore, I think that house arrest and surveillance are extensive. I would request to be released on my own recognizance. I have only been in the community for a short time, but I do have ties here," he said. "Furthermore, while in the UNSC, I can provide detailed accounts of my reliability."

"Don't bother," the judge said. "You're a damned Spartan; if I can't trust you to show up for your own hearing, we might as well shackle everyone with GPS-monitors. Defendant is released on his own recognizance."

"Then we request a temporary restraining order," the lawyer said quickly.

"If it works both ways," John responded just as quickly, "I would be happy to stay far from your clients."

"Done," the judge said. "Representatives â€" and that includes you, Mr. Mackey â€" and employees of News at Nine, Inc., and its affiliates are to keep at least one hundred feet distance from Mr. Leonidas until further notice, barring emergencies and/or unexpected circumstances. That goes for you, too, Mr. Leonidas. No more camera rampages unless that camera turned predator."

"Yes, Your Honor."

"I can't stop other news stations, though," she said warningly.

"I appreciate what you have done," he assured her.

"Very well. Hearing adjourned. John, I'll send someone with court dates. I'll probably have to pass this up the line; I know you a little too well to keep prior knowledge out of my ruling when this goes into real battle." She smiled slightly. John nodded and stood, following Tucker out. The attorney was busy packing his briefcase.

"Did you study law?" Tucker asked curiously. "You'd make a damn good lawyer."

"Only enough to know how to get out of trouble," John chuckled. "I studied a little of everything as part of my training."

"Huh. Well, have a good day, John."

"You, too, sheriff." John hopped in his 'Hog, flicking on the headlights in the growing gloom of dusk. He was careful to avoid the pair of reporters still waiting on the court steps, the camera following him as he drove back towards his house. He passed it, though, and continued on to Rebecca's.

She answered the door and ushered him in quickly, demanding to know how it had gone. When he related the experience, she pursed her lips and nodded. "You did well," she said. "Made the best of a bad situation. So, what do you want to do?"

"I don't know," he rumbled, shrugging.

"How about dinner, a movie, and then a night of stories in front of a digital campfire?" she suggested with a grin.

"That sounds great." Chichi barked in agreement. "I think Chichi likes the idea, too."

"Then let's get started. I'm starving. What do you want?"

"I'm good with anything," John said indifferently.

"Then be a good little Spartan and fetch me some steak from the freezer. I have a hankering for juicy red meat."

John chuckled and went out to the large freezer inside the back porch. He found a good pair of steaks and brought them in; she motioned for him to slice them up and he did so quickly, trimming the majority of the fat off as well.

Rebecca tossed the thin strips into the skillet along with the vegetables she had been cutting, a half-scoop of butter, and some salt, pepper, and freshly chopped garlic. Soon, wonderful aromas began filling John's nose, and his stomach reminded him that he hadn't eaten all day.

"Okay, John, lesson number one â€" when you're cooking with your future partner, some people like getting snuggle-attacked from behind. You're tall enough to actually make this work. Come here." John obediently came up next to Rebecca, glancing at the steak hungrily. She moved such that he was behind her, then looped his arms around her torso and held onto his large hands. "See?" Rebecca leaned back slightly, feeling John's rock-hard chest expanding slightly and then deflating with each breath.

"You're very cuddly," he murmured. He wasn't used to touching someone so much; doctors touched him for examinations, and technicians helped him get into and out of his armor, and sometimes he and his Spartans traded massages and sparred, but this was a different kind of touch. He rarely touched something without an intent to harm it, John

realized silently. It felt good to touch something " especially someone " with only the thought of being close to them.

"I like being cuddled," she said with a theatrical sigh. "So many men think it's weird to snuggle up, it's ridiculous. Like it's _so_ unmanly to be seen snuggling with your girlfriend."

"I have no preconceived notions of manliness," John declared.

"Trust me, you're manly enough for a whole herd of men. But soft and squishy on the inside," she said assertively. "Any future partner you have will love that, probably. Then again, there are people who don't cuddle. Which is silly. Humans are built for contact." She disentangled herself and John leaned against the counter next to her, watching avidly as she expertly fried the stir fry.

"You thought so last night," he told her with a smile. She tilted her head slightly. "You fell asleep with the movie again." It was a common occurrence. John had learned that Rebecca required at least ten hours of sleep every night to feel in peak condition " he was more comfortable with six, himself. He knew that was fairly normal, the differences between sleeping rhythms for people, but he didn't think he could stand being asleep for ten full hours.

"I wondered how I got into bed," she murmured. "Thanks for making sure I got there safely."

"Mhm."

"Here, how's this taste?" She held up a piece of the steak to him; he took it gently and nibbled.

"Really good." He licked his lips. "I'd say it just about done."

"Hmmm. Could you please set the table?"

"Sure thing." John did as she asked. He thought of how much he had improved since moving in nearly four months ago. It was mid-November, he guessed. He hadn't exactly been keeping track of the dates. They had never mattered before " you had hours, not days, usually, when fighting the Covenant. If you got dropped into Slipspace, you went to sleep " and woke up what seemed like minutes later when weeks had passed. It was a little strange, to feel time slipping by at the same pace constantly.

Rebecca caught him brooding and mock-glared. He smiled sheepishly and took the heavy skillet from her, setting it on a hot plate in the middle of the table. She grabbed a serving spoon and the drinks, and they sat down to a delicious dinner. John devoured two helpings easily, and Rebecca was famished as well.

Between them, they polished off the stir-fry and John cleared the table while Rebecca went to pick a movie. She chose one about a young woman's years as a biologist terraforming a new planet, thinking it looked good enough to distract John from the events of the day.

The tall man joined her in the living room quickly, wiping his hands on a towel. They were damp from doing the dishes. She smiled; not many men would do the dishes without being asked. "I see I don't need

to teach you to do the dishes," she said teasingly.

"What's this?" he asked, nodding to the movie, his deep voice making Rebecca think "naughtily, it was that time of her cycle" of what they said about guys with deep voices.

"_Terraformer_," Rebecca said, pulling John onto the couch. He sat carefully and she arranged such that his arm was her pillow. "It's supposed to be really good, even if it is from my childhood."

"Hmmm," John hummed, clearly a little distracted as she wiggled into a more comfortable position. He draped an arm over her side, his fingers delicately brushing her stomach. She squirmed and eyed him; he smirked. "Sorry. I didn't mean to tickle you."

"Suuuuure," she said, rolling her eyes and punching him gently in the chest in retaliation. "Now shush up and watch the movie."

"How does watching a movie improve upon a relationship?" John asked curiously. "I do enjoy spending time with you, but wouldn't talking, or something, be more efficient?"

Rebecca grinned. "It's supposed to be an excuse for you to snuggle with your partner," she told him. "And vice versa. It's nice to just be able to slow down, sit, and cuddle with someone you love. It's left over from teenage date nights; you'd go to the movies because it was dark in the theatre and you could snog in the back without your parents finding out."

"Snog?" John blinked.

"Make out," Rebecca translated. "Kiss, and not in that peck-on-the-cheek chaste way your girlfriend's daddy insisted upon when he was around."

"Ah." He looked back at the TV. "I have to warn you, I'm probably not a great kisser."

"No one really is," Rebecca chuckled. "But as long as you brush your teeth regularly and don't eat a ton of garlic or onions, you'll be fine."

"We just had garlic for dinner."

"And that's why you could carry a little mint gum with you on a date. Just sneak into the bathroom, chew it a while, and you're all set!"

"I see." John thought that over for a few minutes.

She turned her face towards John and was surprised to see his eyes mere centimeters from hers. His eyes were dark, studying her silently. Carefully, he moved forward just a bit, letting their lips gently touch. Rebecca felt a small thrill travel down her spine at the contact and found herself leaning into the kiss, though John was so gentle it felt like a warm breeze caressed her skin and then left.

Rebecca closed her eyes and smiled, savoring the feeling that made

her feel simultaneously electrified and so light she felt like she would drift away. She opened them to find John watching her carefully, with a small smirk on his lips. If he had been affected by the kiss, he didn't show it.

"Damn. Never mind. You've got that down pat," Rebecca said breathlessly, grinning slightly. "Where'd you learn that?"

John shrugged. "Instinct, I guess."

"Well, it's pretty much dead on. Nicely done. Now, watch the movie."

John chuckled. "Yes, ma'am."

Rebecca refused to acknowledge the flutter in her heart as the ghost of that kiss made her lips tingle. He had just been experimenting, she told herself â€" like any teenager. She and her girlfriends had practiced on each other before, and this was no different. Well, it was â€" because they were both adults, and it was a compromising situation. Then again, she reminded herself, John was basically a teenager when it came to learning this new skill. But she'd have to talk to him about personal boundaries. He was far too comfortable with his body to make anything he did seem awkward, but Rebecca wasn't quite as certain of herself, and she didn't want to encourage that flutter.

The movie ended and Rebecca turned it off, turning to the fireplace and turning that on instead. She had a real one that burned actual wood, for when she wanted to feel old-fashioned, but she preferred the digital flames when it was simply for something to look at. They danced prettily.

"Alright, time for some fun," she said, pulling a pile of cushions from the couch onto the floor. Chichi leapt into the mess and snuggled down next to Rebecca as John carefully folded himself on her other side. "We'll take turn telling stories!"

The big man tilted his head slightly. "Would you like to go first, then?"

"No, you go first."

The Spartan frowned thoughtfully. He didn't want to share a story about the war â€" but he had little else. He settled on a memory from training camp.

_John lay in the grass, a long stalk sticking from his mouth. Kelly and Linda were nearby â€" he could hear their breathing â€" and Sam was further away, on guard. The dirt under his back was still warm from the hot day, but the night air was chilly. _

_Fred and Arthur were asleep on the outside of the group. Carris and Victor were on patrol, scouting the enemies' camp. Kelly shifted, rolling onto her side to face John. The boy turned his head and caught her eyes. _

"_Ever wondered what would happen if we justâ€¦ left?" she asked almost silently. Immediately, all of the Spartans in the small hollow where they had gathered to share body heat were awake. _

"_Why would you want to?" Fred asked, a frown in his voice. _

"_I dunno," Kelly said, shrugging. "And I wasn't asking you." She stuck her tongue out at the bigger boy._

"_Bite me," Fred snarled, rolling onto his side away from the group and hunching his shoulders. _

"_Children," John scolded. He glanced at Kelly. "It's our duty to stay. We're gonna be soldiers someday."_

"_And kick ass," Arthur said quietly. "We'll bring peace to humanity."_

"_Peace never lasts," Linda said quietly. "We're proof of that."_

"_Incoming!" The call had everyone on their feet and into the trees as Sam barreled back into the hollow, one arm bleeding sluggishly. John and Kelly grabbed him on their way up the same tree, hauling him by his good arm. Fred and Arthur covered them as John carefully inspected the wound. _

"_What happened?" Kelly demanded. _

"_They got Carris. Victor's down in a hollow." Sam winced as John tore a piece from his own shirt and bound the wound tightly. "I escaped."_

"_Where?" John slipped into leader mode automatically, signaling for the Spartans to prepare. _

"_Just two miles north. They'll be waiting for us."_

"_Let's get Carris out of there," Kelly growled. "You know what they'll do to her."_

John nodded and quickly slid back down the tree. Around him, Red Team formed, ghost-like in the trees, missing two members. "Alright, Sam, lead the way."

_They trooped silently through the woods, avoiding the natural trails and sticking to the thick underbrush, spread out for good measure. Linda and Kelly flanked John, while Fred and Arthur ranged at their six and Sam took point. They quickly made it to the place where Sam had last seen Victor, and Arthur set to tracking their comrade.

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_They found Victor in a cave, recently vacated by a bear from the smell, where the young boy had holed up. Kelly tore a swath from her shirt and bound the gash over his eye, temporarily putting his eye out of use. It was no big loss, however " it was dark anyway.

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"_Move out," John whispered. The Spartans faded into the trees silently, though John made sure to stay close to Victor in case he stumbled in the dark. They moved towards the enemy camp and stopped as they heard the tell-tale whining of the trainer's dogs. _

"_Sam, Fred, scout it out," John ordered as the Spartans regrouped. The two saluted and ran off in opposite directions. "Victor, Linda, Arthur, find trees at noon, three, and six and cover us. Kelly and I will go find Carris."_

"_They probably have her in the bunkers," Victor murmured, crouching and clearing dead leaves from last fall off of a patch of dirt, quickly drawing a plan of the camp. "It's the typical military camp â€" they haven't learned yet â€" but the bunker's hard to get to. The dogs are going to be a problem."_

"_See if you can distract them," John ordered. "If notâ€¦ Take them down." He didn't like giving the order, but he knew it was necessary. Much better to put a dog out of commission than lose Carris. "The same for their handlers. We'll slip in and out. No need for them to know we were here if we can help it."_

"_They've double security," Fred panted as he came back from his scouting run. "Everyone's awake. They know we're going to make a rescue attempt."_

"_It's not going to be an attempt," Kelly snarled. Fred held up his hands in defeat. _

"_Agreed," Sam said, coming back himself. He leaned onto his knees. "They've got the dogs out. I didn't see Carris, though."_

John nodded. "Sam, Fred, with me and Kelly. Let's go."

_The kids disappeared again, moving silently through the forest. John crouched near the border of the camp where the bushes ended. It was a one-hundred meter sprint to the fence, and beyond that, two hundred meters to the bunkers, which were in the very center of the camp. He flexed his fingers. _

Opposite him, he could hear a commotion break out; dogs barked excitedly and handlers yelled in confusion and anger. Kelly smirked and balanced on the edge of her toes. "We can make it over the fence," she muttered. "Just give me a boost up."

_John nodded and collected himself, then burst from his cover. Instantly, Kelly and Fred were on his heels, though Kelly slowed herself to keep pace. Sam followed, slower but still quick. John slid to a halt and put his back to the fence, making a cup of his hands. Kelly leapt, putting her foot â€" and her trust â€" in John's hands. He heaved and sent her flying upwards but was unable to make sure she made it as Fred lined up for the same maneuver. Once he was over, Sam and John climbed the fence together. The two Spartans who were on the other side were already close to the bunker when the alarm went off and search lights spotted Sam and John clinging to the fence. They dropped into the camp and scampered away, drawing attention off of Kelly and Fred. _

_Sam cursed out loud, but John kept his anger internal. The dogs barked and started after them; John risked a glance behind and saw the big bitch nearly at his heels. He put on a burst of speed but knew he couldn't leave Sam behind. _

_So John did the only thing he knew â€" he protected his brother. Turning, he leapt at the dog and bore her down, her jaws snapping at

his face as he snapped her neck and jumped back up, feeling a stab of sorrow but knowing it was necessary. The rest of the pack dropped back slightly, though the trainers behind them kicked them onward.

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"_Over here!" Linda was at the fence, holding a section of it — clearly dug-up — open. Sam threw himself down and slid through, the fence ripping his shirt. John did the same, clearing the fence just as the dogs reached it and Linda dropped it back down. They sprinted back into the woods, splitting up as soon as they hit the trees.

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_John panted as he scaled a tree and looked back at the trainer's camp. Their enemies were milling about in confusion, which made him slightly hopeful that Kelly and Fred had succeeded. He watched for a few minutes more and saw the trainers slowly regain control. The bitch he had killed — it had been so easy, the boy thought, staring at his small hands — was collected and taken into a barn. He saw two shadows detach from the fence and run for the forest, followed by a third that he would recognize anywhere. Sighing in relief — his team was whole again — John leapt from the tree and doubled back to their rendezvous point. _

"We ended up storming the camp the next day. They were using live ammunition, but no one was seriously hurt. We took over, cleaned them out, and reported back to base."

Rebecca shook her head slightly. "I'd never have a story that incredibly amazing. How old were you?"

John hesitated. "Eight," he finally admitted.

Rebecca blinked. From his description, she'd assumed he was at least a teenager. "Damn," she muttered. "That's young."

The big man shrugged. "It was the first time we really — gelled — as a team. Before that, we'd been sparring and stuff, but we'd never gone up against "real" enemies with orders to shoot to kill. Sure, they had medics on hand so we wouldn't really die if something happened, but just the threat was enough. After that — we were unstoppable."

The woman grinned. "I'll drink to that." She pantomimed drinking from a mug and the Spartan tilted his head. "It's a metaphor — It means I agree with you."

"I know," John said softly.

Rebecca yawned, saving herself from having to respond, and glanced at the clock.

"Okay, one more," she decided. "My turn!" John focused on her entirely.

_Rebecca giggled and pulled herself into the seat, buckling in. The young man running the ride smiled at all of the girls and double-checked their harnesses. One of Rebecca's best friends, Mary, screamed in delight as the young man hit the start button and the ride jerked to a slow crawl. _

"_Here we go!" Rebecca yelled, grabbing Mary's hand and crushing it. The two girls behind them â€" Rebecca's friends as well, and Mary's sisters â€" screamed and laughed as the car slowly made its way up the track. They balanced at the top for a moment and all four girls sucked breath in, holding it as the car made a slow tilt downwards.

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_The brakes released and they dropped. Rebecca felt the scream torn from her throat fly away in the wind as it rushed over her; Mary's hand had a death grip on hers, nearly crushing the bones in both hands. All four girls screamed and laughed in delight as they rode the roller coaster. It dropped them, spur them, turned them upside down and then did it all backwards. Finally, they got back to the platform, all four breathless and trying not to puke as the young man released their harnesses. _

"_Look at your face!" Mary screamed, dragging Rebecca to the photo booth where a picture of the four girls was just being printed. "Ooo, look, it's 2D! How cool is that?"_

_She quickly paid for four copies â€" all on old-fashioned paper without even 3D printing or animation. Each girl squealed and hugged them, then traded them so everyone could sign each other's. "We'll be best friends forever, won't we?" Mary said, grinning as she got her picture back with her sisters' and BFF's signatures.

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"_Definitely," Rebecca said, grinning. "Time for cake!"_

_Mary turned green. "No, no food!" she protested, but her sisters dragged her as they followed Rebecca into the nearby restaurant.

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"_There's my princess," Mr. Dalkar crowed, smiling to see Mary. "Time for your birthday wish, birthday girl!"_

"_Daddddyâ€|" Mary whined. "I just rode the roller coaster. I'm gonna puke if you bring out a cake."_

"_Then try some of this," Mrs. Dalkar said quickly, offering a small pill. "You know how vulnerable you are to motion sickness, honey." Mary quickly swallowed the pill and sat down in a booth while waiting for it to take effect. _

"_But it was so much fun, Mom!" the youngest sister â€" just two years younger than Rebecca â€" whined. "Besides, we got to go for free 'cause it's Mary's birthday and the operator _liiiiiiikes_ her."_

"_Does not!" Mary yelled, turning beet-red. _

"_He was ogling you and you know it!" the sister shot back with a giggle. "Did he cop a feel while checking your harness?"_

_The two adults sighed and rolled their eyes as the girls giggled at Mary's embarrassment. _

"_Oh, stop teasing her," Rebecca giggled. "We all know she wants _Ryyyyyan_."_

"_Traitor!" Mary screamed, throwing a napkin at her former BFF.

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"_Everyone knows, sis," June, the youngest, piped up. "You aren't exactly hard to read."_

"_Fine! But you're still a traitor." Mary gumped at Rebecca._

"_I love you, too," Rebecca giggled, planting a big kiss on her friend's head. "Time for cake!"_

_Mary sighed, accepted her BFF back, and then followed her parents into the party room where the parents of the four girls were hanging out. They crowded around and sang "Happy Birthday" loudly, though most of the adults in the room couldn't hold a tune to save their lives. Mary blew out her candles with a big whoosh of spit and air.

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"_What'd you wish for?" Darlene, the middle sister, demanded.

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"_You can't know!" Rebecca scolded. "It doesn't come true if you tell!"_

Darlene pouted and then sniggered. "I bet she wishes Ryan was here!"

"_That's it!" Mary grabbed her sister by the pig tails and grabbed a piece of cake in one hand, bringing the two together with a wet _splorch_. "Take that!"_

_Darlene gasped as her big sister smeared cake all over her. June came to her big sister's rescue, grabbing more cake and jumping on Mary, shoving it into her face. The adults quickly yanked the cake away, though it was already ruined, as the girls giggled and smeared cake all over each other's faces. Even Rebecca got a swipe of frosting across her wide forehead. _

"_I love you guys," Mary said, hugging her BFF and sisters. "Girls forever!"_

"_Hell yes!" the others responded. _

Rebecca smiled fondly at the memory. "Her family was pretty rich. They owned a house on Reach â€" they were there when the Covenant attacked." She sighed slightly. "We were best friends, thoughâ€" She was so funny."

"She sounds like it," John said fondly.

Rebecca pointed to the mantle where John had noticed a picture of four young girls before. "That's that picture. I hung onto it, all these yearsâ€" June's still alive, last I heard, but we grew apartâ€" "

John nodded slightly, at a loss of what to say.

"Okay, another lesson â€" if you're close to someone, that would be a good time to give them a hug," Rebecca said softly, smiling. "Now, it's time for sleep. For me, at least. I know you get by on less, but

this girls needs her beauty sleep."

"You're beautiful already," John protested, grinning as Rebecca blushed slightly.

"Alright, you. Enough. Off to bed."

"Yes, ma'am." John fluffed Chichi's fur and she licked his hand in farewell as he stood. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Rebecca nodded and yawned. "Not too early, though. I want to sleep in."

John dipped his head in acknowledgement and let himself out, leaving Rebecca curled in front of the fire with Chichi draped over her lap.

12. A Day in Court

Chapter 11 - A Day in Court

Rebecca woke to find a giant teddy bear wrapped around her. She opened her eyes and saw Chichi possessively cuddling her. She breathed dog-breath into Rebecca's face, panting. The woman giggled and hugged Chichi, whose entire body wagged.

"Up so soon?" she asked, pulling the covers up to her nose. It was still chilly outside of the warm bed.

Chichi woofed and Rebecca took that as her cue to wake up. She really, really didn't want to, thoughâ€¦ Her cellphone's ring decided her and she grabbed it.

"Good morning," John said from the other side. Rebecca grinned.

"Good morning. Up so early?"

"Court today," he explained. "I have to be in Monty soon. I was just checking to see if you wanted help with the animals?"

Rebecca groaned softly. "I forgot, sorry. Will it take all day?"

"Probably not," John answered. "We're just doing some preliminary today, so far as I know. My lawyers will handle the hard parts; I just have to sit there and look pretty."

Rebecca crawled out of bed, shivering in the cool air. "Well, I might as well come with you."

"It'll be really boring," John warned her.

"You need some support, John." Rebecca tossed on underwear from her dresser, followed quickly by pants and a shirt.

"Thank you." He hung up and put the phone back into his pants pocket, glancing at the mirror to check his appearance â€" polished, as always.

John dressed and quickly went downstairs to make breakfast. He ate the warm PocketFood on the way to Rebecca's house, carefully avoiding getting anything on his pressed suit " if she was coming with him, the least he could do was get the animals settled for the day.

Rebecca was just finishing her morning duties " including a quick shower " when he called into the house that the animals were fed and he had coffee for her. They left Chichi in the house and got into John's Warthog sitting in the driveway.

They talked quietly on the way to Monty, John seemingly calm about what he was about to face. Rebecca squeezed his hand as they approached the large courthouse, ringed out in front by a crowd of cameras, reporters, and gawkers. John's lips pressed into a tight line, and Rebecca smiled encouragingly at him. He smiled back and parked the 'Hog, meeting her in front of the hood and escorting her across the street.

The mob immediately attacked them. Reporters yelled questions; John stayed silent, pushing through and protecting Rebecca from the reporters as well. One of the reporters yelled a question at her; she shook her head in exasperation, not hearing most of it, and hurried into the courthouse. John followed quickly, nudging the door firmly closed behind them.

They found John's appointed courtroom. Rebecca sat on the bench just behind John, who met with his lawyers for a quick debriefing. They had been briefed before meeting him and accepted him quickly, briskly coming to business after introducing themselves. They were there to protect the release of any classified information, and to represent him in this matter. Each was enlisted in the UNSC specifically for cases such as these.

"We'll take care of you, Mr. Leonidas," the youngest assured him. She was about twenty, fresh out of law school. "You just answer the questions we tell you to."

John nodded and sat down, waiting for the prosecutor's side to finish their own conversation. He steadfastly avoided looking at them, preferring to concentrate on the sound of Rebecca's soft breathing behind him. It steadied him.

"All rise for the honorable Judge Gilbetason." An elderly man walked in as John stood at attention, Rebecca rising a second later. The man surveyed the court " reporters had filled in the spots where curious citizens hadn't claimed benches. It was packed, though by order of the court, no cameras were allowed inside.

"Sit down," the judge ordered, taking his seat behind the podium. The case was introduced, the opening arguments made by the lawyers on each side, and John sat through his first court hearing. He had been court martialed once, but the charges were dropped when the complaint was mysteriously misfiled.

"Our first witness is Lacy Masters." The woman reporter took to the witness box, sitting primly and glaring at John. She was sworn in quickly, her piping voice grating on John's sensitive ears.

"Ms. Masters, how did you find the Spartan's house?"

"My station's researchers have been searching night and day," she sniffed. "We finally found an eyewitness who had posted a picture of someone suspiciously like the Spartan. Online communities were busy attempting to verify the image, but since no photographs exist of him outside of his armor, they were unable to. However, we managed to get in touch with the original poster and ascertained that the picture was taken at a shopping mall in Monty. From there, we began searching radially outward for people who recent moved in and then dug up the files on every one. "John Leonidas" matched the description and the parameters we set."

"So you were sent to interview him?"

Ms. Masters nodded primly. "I generally cover the veteran stories we do. Peter, my cameraman, and Kirt, my transmissions expert, were with me at the time of the attack. We usually work together."

"What kind of stories have you covered before?"

"Soldiers returning to their families. It really is very touching." The lawyer nodded, clearly faking his moved expression. Ms. Masters smiled softly, as though fondly remembering the men and women she had interviewed when they came home. "The worst ones are soldiers returning who have nothing â€" their families were glassed, or died in battle as well, or they have amnesia or PTSD or any of the horrible outcomes of war."

"Would you say you are emotionally involved in your career?"

Ms. Masters nodded enthusiastically. "The world needs to know what is happening. We've just survived a threat that could easily have caused humanity's extinction. But we have to remember our fallen, our heroes, and our shattered warriors."

"And how does this connect with John-117?"

"Objection!" one of John's lawyers shouted, standing. "Mr. Leonidas does not go by that name any longer."

"Overruled. Continue, please." The judge turned back to the lawyer and his client.

"John-117, or Mr. Leonidas as he is called now, is humanity's hero. We've spent decades hearing about him and the Spartans taking the fight to the Covenant. There's amazing stories but, sadly, very little footage of the whole event."

"Why is that?"

"Cameras don't belong in battle zones. The Spartans were often whisked from planet to planet faster than the news crews could keep up with them. And we weren't able to televise a death, either, because of ONI. And I'm not saying they were wrong â€" they had a difficult choice to make, and I think that telling the public Spartans were immortal was necessary, but it was a lie nonetheless. My station wants to commemorate our fallen heroes, and the Master Chief is the only one left alive who knew the Spartans as more than robots in armor."

"If given a chance to interview him, what would you ask?"

"Objection!" Dr. Anderson shot to her feet, bouncing slightly. "This isn't an interview!"

"I agree," the judge said after a pause. "Get on with it, Mr. Mackey."

"Very well. Ms. Masters, what did you think when you first saw John-117?"

"Well, the first time I saw him was during some televised footage of him and a few other Spartans taking the fight to the Covenant on Victoria. However, if you mean without armor, during the incident we're currently debating, I was shocked. I mean, look at him." The entire court's eyes were instantly riveted on the Spartan, who sat a little straighter. "He's almost seven feet tall, solid muscle, and damn intimidating."

"Keep a civil tongue, Ms. Masters," the judge warned. "I'll not have cursing in my court room."

"Sorry, Your Honor. I was trying to make a point." Ms. Masters turned back to addressing her lawyer. "He looks like he's been fighting his entire life â€" and he's not even that old. I was definitely intimidated."

"What was the first thing that happened?"

"Well, he was in shorts and without a shirt, so I assume he had just woken up â€" it was around seven AM, after all, and we all know that veterans tend to sleep more than the average person. He asked if he could help us, as though we were lost."

"And your response?"

"I told Peter to get the camera. I was eager to show the public that war does have a price â€" it's written all over his skin."

John felt uncomfortably aware of every single scar currently visible. It was true â€" war did have a price. But he hadn't paid most of it.

"And his response? "His" being "John's," for the record."

"He got mad â€" I think. It was kind of hard to tell. But he definitely looked like he was going to seriously hurt someone. And he advanced on me, so I got kind of scared. You know, I'm not exactly a body builder." It was true â€" while thin, she was the sickly kind of thin associated with drugs and eating disorders.

"What happened next?"

"I told him as authoritatively as I could â€" I figured he'd respond better to orders, being a professional soldier â€" that we had a right to be there."

"And then what?"

"Peter came out with the camera and he completely ignored me, grabbed it, and crushed it with one hand. That camera was expensive! It was a brand new one, too, to celebrate a historic interview," Ms. Masters whined. "My producer gave it to my team specially for this event."

"If I may direct Your Honor's attention to defense's Exhibit A." The lawyer picked up several pieces of black metal, glass, and electronics. "This is the camera that was crushed by Mr. Leonidas, recovered by Peter from the scene before they left. And Exhibit B is a fully-intact camera, identical to the one Mr. Leonidas destroyed."

It looked indestructible. The judge glanced at John. "Breaking in for evidence," he said quietly. "Mr. Leonidas, please rise."

John stood and came to attention, hands folded behind his back. Judge Gilbetason nodded. "Now, if you please, destroy that camera as you did its cousin."

"Your Honor, will I not be held accountable for this one?" John asked.

"Yes, yes. I want to ensure you can do it."

The court room watched avidly as John sedately paced to the persecutor's table and hefted the camera in one hand, easily. It looked much smaller. He turned to the judge and squeezed â€" there was the faint groan of metal, a shriek of plastic, and the camera burst apart.

The audience murmured as John resumed his spot standing in front of his chair. He didn't like that he'd been forced to play along, but he understood â€" the camera looked strong, but it wasn't nearly as hard to pop as a Grunt's head.

"You may continue, counselor." Judge Gilbetason turned back to Mr. Lackey.

"Thank you, Your Honor. Ms. Masters, after he destroyed the camera, did Mr. Leonidas say anything?"

Ms. Masters shook her head. "I was frightened and thought he was going to come after me next. He went back into his house, though, and we left."

"Did you exchange words after the incident?"

"As Peter was picking up the pieces, I informed the Spartan â€" though I cannot be sure he heard me since he was inside and I was on the driveway, legally â€" that we would be filing a suit against him."

"That's all, thank you, Ms. Masters."

John's lawyers took turns peppering Ms. Masters, worming the truth of her interviews from her â€" how she had often been asked and told repeatedly to leave people alone, how hungry she was for a good story, and how willing she was to bend the rules a little. However,

she continually professed that she had a right to be on John's driveway " which was technically true " and refused to claim that she had provoked a potentially lethal man into attacking.

The prosecutors followed through with other witnesses, including a psychologist who described the possibilities that John was entirely unstable, mentally, and could be a threat if cornered or seemingly in harm's way. Each was cross-examined by John's lawyers, who each made excellent cases, rooting the truth from the psychologist that it was also entirely possible for anyone to get mad if their private life was suddenly being televised. The fact that John sat calmly at his table, without reacting when confronted indirectly by the witnesses, clearly helped his case.

The defense rested and it was John's turn. He stood in the podium, after a quick fuss about the rickety witness chair that clearly wouldn't hold him, and swore himself to tell the truth, though he never did otherwise. He calmly described the incident, agreeing that he had crushed the camera but denied making threats to the reporters themselves or continued his aggression.

The prosecution began questioning him closely.

"Mr. Leonidas, please state your full name for the record."

"John Leonidas."

"And your former name, as you have been known during your years as a soldier of the UNSC."

"Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy Sierra-117, Spartan II." There were a few cheers from the crowd, which the judge quickly called to order.

"What is a Spartan-II, Mr. Leonidas?"

"Spartan-IIs are augmented soldiers, created by a program run by Dr. Halsey and ONI."

"Are you classified as human?"

"Yes, sir." John ignored the anger in Rebecca's eyes, directed at the lawyer pestering him.

"What kind of training did you undertake?"

John glanced at his lawyers; they nodded for him to answer. "Physical training " including the use of all human, and later Covenant, weapons and technology, all forms of martial arts, and several fighting styles as they suited us individually. Mathematical and scientific training, enough to allow us to, in the event of an emergency, calculate proper Slipspace coordinates and trajectories in order to bring ourselves and any crew with us to safety. Terrain identification, climate observation, weather interpretation, and mapping techniques. First aid and advanced medical care. Basic mechanics and safety training, so we could repair our armor in the field if necessary. Several human languages and, later, basic Covenant languages as well."

"That's enough," the lawyer interrupted. "Short and sweet, please,

Mr. Leonidas."

"We were taught to win," John answered simply.

"Is it true you have been trained to kill since you were a child?" Mr. Mackey asked.

"That's classified," John answered without checking with his lawyers.

"Would you say you are an aggressive person, Mr. Leonidas?"

John tilted his head. "When the situation calls for it, sir."

"Like what?"

"If I or another human is threatened or in danger."

"And was the camera attacking you?"

"Not physically, sir."

"Then what threat did it pose to your wellbeing?"

"It threatened to expose my identity, which is something that was classified until very recently."

"If your identity is known, why would you care about it being released?"

"It would have revealed my location and home address, sir, which would have led to more invasions of my privacy, and quite possibly, the privacy of my friends and neighbors."

"So you have made friends?"

"Objection!" The young lawyer stood. "I fail to see the connection, Your Honor."

Mr. Mackey quickly explained. "I am trying to establish Mr. Leonidas's state of mind during the attack."

"I'll allow it," the judge said. "But get to the point, Mr. Mackey."

"Thank you, Your Honor." He turned back to John. "So, have you made friends?"

"Yes, sir."

"And are there any in this courtroom?"

"Yes."

"Could you please indicate them?"

"Why? Their identities nor their connection to me has any relevance to this case."

"I agree," the judge said. "Move on, Mr. Mackey."

"Yes, Your Honor. Mr. Leonidas, have you ever been in uncomfortable situations? Socially, I mean."

"Yes, sir."

"And how do you generally deal with uncomfortable situations?"

"I avoid them." A light chuckle passed through the audience. "If I am caught in one accidentally, I do not interfere if possible."

"If it's not possible?"

"Then I will do anything to protect myself and my interests."

"Your interests â€" you mean your friends?" John nodded. "Please speak for the record."

"Yes, sir."

"And how do you "protect" yourself and your friends?"

John shrugged. "I was trained to do it in many ways, sir. Physically being the most engrained."

"So are you a violent person?"

John smirked. "Spartans were trained to be violent. But we can â€" and do â€" exert excessive amounts of control over ourselves."

"Where was that control during the attack?"

"Due to the nature of the situation, I felt it was necessary to protect myself forcefully."

"It was a camera. It wasn't going to eat you." A light laugh came from a few of the audience members.

"No, but it would have brought many more intruders into my land. I also asked the reporters to remove themselves from my property, though I understand now that they were within their rights to be there, after a careful reading of related laws and cases."

"Thank you. No more questions, Your Honor."

The oldest of John's lawyers stood. "So, Mr. Leonidas, describe the typical day you go through."

John tilted his head. "I wake up at 0600 hours, do a weight lifting routine, eat breakfast, help my neighbor, usually eat lunch with them, go for a hike or a run, do any chores of my own that require my attention, and â€" lately â€" prepare for this hearing." The lawyer nodded. "Then I eat dinner, check the news regarding several topics of interest to me, possibly call an old friend, and go to bed."

"And when the reporters came to your door, what were you doing?"

"I woke up when they drove in," John said.

"So you were still a little groggy from sleep?"

"Not necessarily. I am alert within an instant of waking."

"Left over from the war, no doubt." John nodded. "Can you describe what you thought when Ms. Masters approached you?"

"I thought they might be lost, sir, so I asked if it could provide assistance. Upon seeing me, Ms. Masters called for Peter to get the camera. I was angry and felt like my privacy was being infringed upon."

"And a man's privacy is very important to him," the lawyer agreed. "What is your usual outlet for your anger, Mr. Leonidas?"

"Until recently, the Covenant and Flood." The audience chuckled; a few whistled in appreciation. Judge Gilbetason banged his gavel for silence, threatening to clear the court. "I have access to some of the best psychologists, as well, should I feel the need to discuss a problem."

"Most notably Dr. Halsey, currently missing along with some of your Spartan fellows, correct?"

"Yes, sir."

"If you have a problem, who do you normally turn to for answers?"

"I was taught to solve it myself, but in the case of something I cannot answer, I turned to Dr. Halsey, the AI Cortana, who was often with me during engagements through my armor integration system, or my fellow Spartans."

"All of who were inaccessible for one reason or another at the time of the incident, correct?"

"Yes, sir."

"So, you were taught to do things for yourself â€" an admirable quality in a soldier, for sure. But when you couldn't, you had a support net â€" which, during the incident, was absent. Correct?"

"Yes, sir."

"So, in your mind, did you commit a crime?"

"Yes, sir." There were a few murmurings from the audience.

"And what was that?"

"I did destroy the station's camera, for which I have offered to pay. I am also guilty of defending my right to privacy."

"That's not a crime," the judge told him.

"It is what I have been accused of," John explained. "There is precedent, Your Honor. In the case of Kadbury v. Andromeda News, Inc., Kadbury was found guilty of property damage after she destroyed a surveillance system she was convinced was following her.

The invasion of privacy law was upheld over the property damage laws quoted in the case."

"You do know your court law, I'll give you that, Mr. Leonidas, but please let your lawyers defend you."

"But, Your Honor, I am allowed to speak in my own defense."

"Very well, Mr. Leonidas. Dr. Thaddius, please continue."

"Thank you, Your Honor. Mr. Leonidas, how long did you serve as a soldier, publicly?"

"Over twenty-five years, sir."

"And did you, in that time, encounter many situations in which you were forced to defend yourself and/or your team?"

"Yes, sir. Thousands of times."

"And, in your mind, the camera would have threatened you and your friends, correct?"

"Yes, sir."

"Why did you not remove the human element attached to that threat? The reporters, I mean."

John blinked, clearly confused. "They're humans, sir."

"So? They were threatening you, weren't they?"

"They were no threat to me, sir. If one had made a move that I interpreted as dangerous, it would have been an easy matter to dispatch the threat."

"By killing them?"

"It is easy for me to do so, if necessary, though my first choice would be to incapacitate them without serious injury."

"You differentiated between the camera and the human wielding it, then. One was a threat and the other was not, correct?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you have been taught to protect humans?"

"As a Spartan, my duty is to protect humanity." There were a few cheers from the audience.

"You said 'is,' not 'was.' Is it still your duty to protect humanity?"

"I will always protect humans and our allies," John said simply.

"Thank you, Mr. Leonidas. You may step down, unless the prosecutors have any more questions?" The lawyers shook their heads. John moved down from the podium and resumed his seat on his side of the

courtroom.

Another witness was called, which surprised John. Cortana's portable AI was taken into the witness stand, and she appeared as a hologram on the podium.

The prosecution immediately yelled an objection, which the defense won. Cortana smirked at John in a greeting.

"Please state your name for the record," the judge told Cortana.

"I am Cortana, UNSC Intelligence Agent number CTN 0452-9."

"Proceed, defense."

"Thank you, Your Honor. Cortana, do you know the defendant well?"

"As well as any sentient being currently alive," she said quietly, glancing at John.

"How long have you served with Mr. Leonidas?"

"We served together for several years; I chose to work with him based on our neural compatibility."

"What were some of the missions you completed together?"

"We destroyed the first Halo Ring, destroyed a Covenant armada, infiltrated and destroyed the Gravemind of the Flood, and led numerous assaults on Covenant ships and planets."

"How would you describe Mr. Leonidas?"

Cortana chuckled. "He's a Spartan, sir. That's all the description anyone ever needs."

"Indulge me."

"He is strong, both physically and mentally. His social skills are not as developed as a result of the Spartan program, but it has never proved a barrier for most of his life. John is a guardian, both by training and inborn inclinations. He is resourceful, determined, serious, caring, and lucky."

"Lucky?"

"Yes."

"In what ways?"

"He survives. Always."

"And this is notable?"

Cortana put her hands on her hips. "He's flat-lined at least a dozen times that I've been aware of, being in his armor. Without medical assistance, he restarted his own heart several times; other times, I've intervened or a medical team was on hand."

The audience murmured; John glared slightly. He wasn't interested in feeding the press. Cortana smiled apologetically.

"He survived injuries that would have killed a normal human several times over," she summarized.

"So, he's tough. When faced with what he perceives as a threat, what did Mr. Leonidas do while you worked together?"

"He killed it, if it was an enemy. The few times the threat was human â€" the hostility between Spartans and Helljumpers is public knowledge, I am sure â€" John and his Spartans ignored it, mostly."

"So Mr. Leonidas is no stranger to human threats?"

"Spartans were originally trained to quell the Insurrectionists," Cortana answered. "But the Covenant changed their objectives, obviously. However, certain soldiers always decided that belittling the Spartans was a way to 'put them in their place.' It was a common rumor that Spartans were robots."

"Was John ever violent with a human after such a threat?"

"Only on the orders of a commanding officer, sir."

"Can you describe that incident?"

"No, sir. It is classified."

"I see. What do you think John should have done, faced with a camera and the threat to his right to privacy?"

"I would have urged him to destroy the camera. I have run that decision through my ethics subroutine, and it agreed that, in the situation, that was the second best result. The other would have been to retreat, but Spartans don't know how to do that, and it would not have solved the problem and still resulted in the loss of his privacy."

"Thank you. No more questions."

The prosecutor stood and stalked forward. "You are an AI, correct? You are not a human?"

"I am a 'smart' AI, sir, and with Forerunner technologies, I have become closer to what you define as 'human.' I do not possess a physical body yet, but with my current research and access to Forerunner technology, I estimate that to become a reality within a few years."

"So how can you possibly understand Mr. Leonidas, a human with far more complexity than yourself?"

"My creator is classified, but they used very advanced techniques that, again, Forerunner technologies have improved upon, with my help, to make me just as complicated as you humans. I have also worked very closely with John for years, a claim no one present can make." _Only the Spartans,_ Cortana sighed to herself.

"Yet you have a data chip instead of a brain."

"I prefer to think of it as a favorable change. A brain is so easily damaged, after all." There were a couple of snickers from the audience.

"Has John ever become violent and put you or himself in danger?"

"Yes to both, though that was our job."

"Clarify." John stiffened; the lawyer was talking to Cortana like she was a dumb program, only capable of turning on a house's lights. However, Cortana smiled sweetly, though anyone who knew her well could see the wickedness in the way the code scribed through her holographic body.

"John and I were paired in order to increase his ability to fight â€" I had access to Covenant translators, communication traffic, and other pieces of information he used to best frustrate the enemy. He, in turn, carried me into battle to provide ground-side reports to our commanding officers. Our orders were to kill Covenant, protect UNSC soldiers â€" and later Sangheili allies â€" and provide intel, in that order. In order to fulfill those orders, John was required to be violent. A pacifist Spartan doesn't do anyone except the Covenant any good on the field. And we were required to be in the middle of the battle, which, by definition, meant we were constantly in danger."

"You have access to psychology texts and information, correct?"

"Yes, and I have studied them extensively as they pertain to working with someone like John."

"And what do they say?"

"It is imperative not to threaten a Spartan. They are trained to take that threat out." She glared pointedly at Ms. Masters. "It is also to be understood that Spartans will continue to fight long past their unaugmented comrades. This makes them very stubborn. When injured, they have the ability to ignore the pain to a point where their bodies will continue to react even after complete brain death."

"Yes, yes, you admire the Chief. We all know of your attachment. What about socially?"

Cortana transferred her gaze to the lawyer. "Socially, Spartans are black sheep. Their size alone sets them apart, and during the years in the UNSC, they were rarely out of their armor long enough to mingle with the soldiers, even if the soldiers would have accepted them. Needless to say, most did not; the Spartans were too inhuman to form close bonds with regular men and women. They often chose cryo-sleep during long Slipspace jumps. They are designed and trained to work with each other or alone. They will defend and lead non-augmented humans, but they cannot act so cohesively with them in battle.

"Furthermore, as far as civilian social skills, Spartans never had

any. Their training was purely military. They respond to and give orders. John's last orders from the admiral were in regards to having a good life " which, to his friends, means living simply as John Leonidas, not Spartan-117. Therefore, the camera was threatening his following of those orders."

"So, Mr. Leonidas reacted as an automaton programmed to destroy anything that it perceived as a threat."

"No. If John had 'destroyed anything he perceived as a threat,' this would be a triple homicide. He expressed self-control and good judgment."

"Yet he obliterated a defenseless camera."

"Which was streaming live video to a news station in Denver, I understand. Therefore, he had to destroy it before it was able to divulge his location."

"Would you agree that, if necessary, John is a violent person?"

"Yes, in the right situation."

"And is he physically able to destroy anything he puts his mind to?"

"I wouldn't put it past him."

"Then you can conclude that he meant to destroy that camera, with a vicious intent?"

"He said that he meant to crush the camera," Cortana huffed, obviously impatient. "But he wasn't being 'vicious' about it at all."

"Thank you, Cortana. You're dismissed." Cortana's hologram faded; a police officer rolled her podium away.

"Your Honor, the defense rests."

"Very well. I will hear closing arguments."

The lawyers delivered them, but it was clear that John's case had been made. He had crushed the camera " but he had not "harassed" anyone.

The judge released everyone, stating that he would sent out a notice when he had reviewed the relevant laws and come to a decision.

The courtroom slowly emptied; John and Rebecca waited until everyone else had left before John turned to her and smiled slightly. "I think I've won," he said quietly.

"You always do," she chuckled, standing heading out the door. "Shall we enjoy a night on the town?"

"What would you like to do?" John asked courteously, holding open the door for her.

Flashes of light exploded in his vision and John dropped instantly into fight-or-flight mode, gently " but quickly " shoving Rebecca behind him and trying to see through the bright light, bringing his hand up to shade his eyes. He growled in anger as the source of the light became apparent.

"John, over here! Do you think you've won the case?" a reported yelled from his right.

"117, what will you do now? Will you go back to the UNSC?"

"What do you plan to do next?"

John took a deep breath and turned to Rebecca, who was still partially inside the open door. "Well, bloodthirsty reporters are here" What do you suggest?"

"Gently work through the crowd," she said, peeking around him. "And don't let them eat me."

"I won't," he promised, gently taking her elbow. "Just stay with me."

John pushed into the crowd, not _trying_ to step on anyone but also not actively avoiding them.

"Ma'am, do you have any comments for the public?" a reporter screamed at Rebecca, shoving a microphone into her face. Rebecca shook her head and stuck to John's heels.

"John, is it true you are the last surviving Spartan?"

"No comment," John grunted when the man refused to move from his path, bringing the pair to a halt. "Let me pass."

"The public deserves to know!" another reported scolded from his left. "Is this your girlfriend?" There were a few assorted giggles in the crowd; Rebecca glowered, but the look John shot at the man was downright murderous.

"What do you do with yourself now?"

"Are you going to move?"

"What do you think about the human-Sangheili alliance?"

John pushed past the man finally, taking great care not to break anything, and they broke into the clear street. The Spartan held open the door in the Warthog's passenger side " he had had them added because of the cold winter days " and Rebecca quickly got in, letting him close the door and slide around the front of the large vehicle to get to the driver's side. The reporters milled about in confusion, unsure if they wanted to mob the dangerous-looking vehicle.

"Let's go get dinner first," Rebecca suggested, glaring through the windshield at the humans on the sidewalk.

"Where would you like to go?" John's voice was even, apparently not kerfuffled over the reporters any longer. He had clearly dismissed

them from his mind, concentrating only on Rebecca " and getting out of there.

"How about Oriental Sun?"

"Sounds good to me," he said, turning on the car. "Thanks for coming with me today."

"I'm glad I did. Beats sitting at home chewing on my nails all day. And I kinda got to meet Cortana, too. She's a character."

John grinned. "She is an amazing woman."

Rebecca lifted an eyebrow. "You know, I think she's attached to you."

John pulled out of the parking lot and turned on the car's headlights. "And I to her. She's saved my life countless times. She practically lived in my head for most of her operational life, before the Forerunner technology."

"I just got a gross image of your brain being all purple and glowing," Rebecca groaned, laughing.

John snorted in amusement. "Well, she did make use of my wetware often enough."

"How is that possible?" Rebecca asked, tilting her head. John leaned his head forward and tapped the base of his neck, where his neural implants began.

"She's tie into my suit and then into my neural lace from there. Other than that, I'm not entirely sure. It's all Greek to me."

Rebecca grinned. "Shakespeare. I like it."

John smirked slightly. They quickly found the restaurant and parked. The Spartan led the way in. The staff was accustomed to the odd couple by now and quickly found them a booth in a dark corner. They ordered their usual meals and talked until the food arrived. Both were hungry and finished their plates quickly, though Rebecca had to fend off John's chopsticks once as he playfully snuck food from her plate. He replaced it, of course, while she tried to stab gently at his hand with her fork.

"Damn reflexes," she muttered as she playfully stuck her tongue out at John. He grinned and leaned back, already done with his plate.

Rebecca, spurred by John's chopsticks as they walked themselves towards her plate again, finished her food. John paid for the meal over her protests and they drove home, laughing the whole way. John took them to Rebecca's house where Chichi leaped all over both of them, delighted that the pair had finally returned. John took her for a walk while Rebecca checked on the rest of the animals, who were happy in their warm barn.

Chichi curled up on the couch with the pair as the night slowly slid by. John and Rebecca talked quietly for a while before Rebecca

finally admitted she couldn't stay awake. Chichi was miffed when the big Spartan left without his usual ruffle to her fur, but she put her head on her paws and was just happy that her owner was so happy.

13. Interlude

_Please note: I will be updating every Thursday or Friday night, so you'll get an update about every week. If I feel particularly generous, I'll upload more than that. _

_Any thoughts about Halo 4? I watched _Forward Unto Dawn_ recently â€" amazing! And, since I don't have an Xbox, I watched the story line of Halo 4 on Youtube. It. Is. Awesome. But, not what I had expectedâ€| So this story just got a little more AU. I won't spoil it for anyone by saying HOW it's more AU, but it is. _

Chapter 12: Interlude

"Therefore, by the power vested in me, I pass judgment," Judge Gilbetason said solemnly. "In regards to the charge of extensive property damage totaling \$20,000, I find John Leonidas, the defendant, guilty." There was little reaction; everyone had expected that. An investigation by John's lawyers had revealed that the lawyer had been bluffing when he quoted \$40,000 as well, and knocked the charges down to \$20k, including the replacement cost and lost time. "In regards to the charge of harassment, I find the defendant not guilty." There was a cheer in the audience. "In regards to the charge of terrorism, I find the defendant not guilty." Another, louder, cheer. John dipped his head in acceptance of the ruling. "My final remark to you, Mr. Leonidas, is to be careful. You are a hero and a celebrity, and you are entitled to privacy, but only so far. You will probably find yourself facing cameras again, and I hope not to hear of any more repeats of this incident."

"Of course, Your Honor," John said.

"Case closed. The court is dismissed." The judge stood and went to his chambers; John thanked his lawyers and arranged to pay the fine to the station through them. He then made his way through the crowds of reporters â€" which he ignored steadfastly â€" to his car, got in, and drove back to Rebecca's house. She greeted him at the door, demanding to know what had happened.

"Just like I said. Guilty, innocent, and innocent," he said with a grin. She launched herself into his arms with a squeal of glee.

"I knew you could do it," she told him, grinning. John hummed and set her down.

"Now _that_ is cute," a voice behind Rebecca drawled sarcastically. John glanced up and smirked at Luke. "I think I have to barf."

Rebecca turned around and wagged her finger at her brother. "How many times did _I_ have to endure watching you kiss your girlfriends?" she demanded, laughing.

"You're my little sister. It's different," he explained. "I'm

supposed to pound on guys who try to kiss you, remember?"

John shook his head. "I was trying nothing of sort. Of course, you're welcome to try, little man."

"Little?! _Little?!_ I'll have you know I'm above average height!" Luke shot back, grinning.

"I'm so scared," John whispered loudly to Rebecca. Luke just mock-glared and marched back into the house, but emerged quickly with a mug of hot chocolate and his coat. "Alright, well, you two have a good day. I'm off to work." He waved and hopped in his car.

"I have an appointment soon, too," John said thoughtfully, following Rebecca into the house. Chichi bounded over and the Spartan was engulfed in dog kisses. "Yes, yes, Chichi. You're cute." He ruffled her fur and obediently gave her a belly rub when she flopped onto her back. He glanced up at the clock and then at Rebecca. "I hate to cut this short, but I must be going. Have a good day, Rebecca."

"Here, take some lunch with you." She handed him a wrapped sandwich. "Otherwise, you won't eat."

John managed to look slightly abashed, thanked her for the food, and let himself out again.

Mindful of Cortana's recommendation, John had scheduled a general check-up with the local clinic. His appointment was for noon and he arrived fifteen minutes early to fill in the necessary forms. He was shown into a private room and a nurse took his blood pressure, heart rate, pulse, height, and weight measurements and then left with a cheery wink and assurance that the doctor would be in momentarily.

John was standing near the examination table when the doctor knocked and entered quickly, holding John's chart in one hand. "I'm Dr. Franco, Mr. Leonidas. How are we today?" he asked with a smile. His eyes were a clear brown, his hair nearly nonexistent and white where it showed. His beard was neatly trimmed, however. He was somewhere in his seventies, John guessed. He sat in the wheeling chair and flipped through the chart.

"Well enough, sir. Before we begin, I must ask that you keep everything I reveal to you in the strictest confidence. I know doctor-patient privileges require you to keep mum on my medical information, but I must impress upon you how important that is."

"Never fear, Mr. Leonidas." The doctor smiled kindly. "I'm retired ONI. I know how to keep a secret." John nodded, grateful. "When we saw who was making an appointment, I decided to put myself on your chart. I have many young interns who would probably spend the whole appointment yabbering on about how amazing you were as a Spartan, yadda yadda. Anyway, you're just here for a check-up?"

John nodded. "I've been told by a good friend of mine that I should keep an eye out for some problems."

"Take a seat, son," he said kindly. John did so. "I see from your medical record from the UNSC that you've been augmented." Dr. Franco

perused his records. "Most of your internal organs have been replaced â€" you're aware that replacements sometimes fail earlier than originals?" John nodded. "Good, we'll keep an eye on them. You look to be in excellent health, aside from the obvious. Your blood pressure is a little high, which is to be expected. Your heart looks good. Hm. Have you ever considered plastic surgery for those scars?"

John shook his head. "I like them."

"Good. Too many kids these days think perfect skin is all the rage. I'll have you know, it's not. Perfection is way overrated. Are you sexually active?"

John blinked at the rapid change of topic. "No, sir."

"I thought as much. Do you know what STIs and STDs are?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you know how to use condoms correctly?"

"There's an incorrect way?" John asked, curious.

"Well, considering your augmentations, they're more liable to break," Dr. Franco explained. "And you don't wear them on your finger."

"I know that, sir."

"You might consider discussing other forms of birth control with your partner," Dr. Franco continued. "If zhey're female and you are looking to prevent pregnancy, that is. If you are not, I highly suggest extensive DNA tests to confirm you can reproduce without endangering your partner or child."

"If I ever do, I will keep that in mind," John assured him. He hadn't really expected this.

"Women are a little touchy about it sometimes."

"Yes, sir."

"Hm. I see you're up to date on your shots â€" though I pity the virus that tries to take on your immunity system. I see a slight genetic predisposition towards balding, but your hair looks fine for now. Unlike some of us." Dr. Franco chuckled. John grinned, deciding he liked his doctor.

"Let's seeâ€" Do you have any concerns?"

"My friend â€" Cortana, the AI â€" said to look out for possible organ failure, any complications from the numerous blood transfusions I've received, genetic problems if I do choose to have children â€" though I'm not even close to thinking about it â€" and possibly some mental problems."

Dr. Franco nodded. "You are resilient, John, but even the best soldiers suffer from PTSD and other complications. I can't diagnose them directly, but you seem very well adjusted. Judging by what I've seen on the news about how Spartans were supposedly trained, I'm sure

you've had help."

John smiled slightly. "My neighbor Rebecca helped me adjust, sir."

Dr. Franco nodded. "I'm glad. We get too many people trying to adjust and just not coping. Suicide rates are extremely high right now. As to the blood problems, I can do some tests right now. It'll just take a moment."

John nodded and allowed the doctor to remove two vials of blood from his arm. He taped a cotton ball over the small wound and ordered John to rub it with his finger while he tested it. John did as he was told and Dr. Franco was back within fifteen minutes.

"You check out across the board," he said. "Now, we didn't screen for some of the more elusive diseases, but those manifest symptoms, so we can be pretty sure you aren't suffering from any of those. The only thing I'm a little worried about is your cholesterol â€" but it's just barely over the perfect margin, so it's really not a concern. Just work out, eat healthy, and be happy. That's the best medicine I can prescribe to anyone. Alright, let's test your reflexes."

"I wouldn't," John warned. "I could accidentally hurt you."

Dr. Franco hummed and nodded slightly. "I guess that's true. Please remove your shirt." John did so quickly. Dr. Franco felt along his ribs, asking if he had any discomfort, and then listened to his breathing and his heart through stethoscope. "Good, you're checking out rather well." He felt along John's back, pressing gently on either side of his vertebrae. "A few minor muscles out of place, but that's probably from the extensive surgeries you've been through. Have you ever noticed any sharp pains in your back or legs?" John shook his head. "Do you stretch a lot?"

"Sometimes, and always after a workout."

"Good. You need to keep limber. Your joints are badly overused. Well, your entire body is. If you don't stay loose, you're going to freeze up and get arthritis faster than I am."

"I'll keep it in mind."

"Hm, now this is interesting. A replaced vertebra?"

"I disobeyed the doctor and broke it," John admitted.

"Well, at least it's a good replacement." Dr. Franco prodded his lower back. "Do you sleep on your back, side, or stomach?"

"Usually on my side."

"Good. It's better for your back." Dr. Franco continued feeling around John's torso and then stepped back. "Well, so far as I can tell, you're in really good shape. Banged up, obviously, but you've healed from every broken bone and torn muscle and shredded ligament. Just remember to keep yourself moving. A body in motion stays in motion!"

"That's physics," John chuckled.

"Well, it's a good motto anyway." Dr. Franco smiled. "If you come back every year, we'll keep an eye on those organs for ya. If you have any problems, don't hesitate to call or make an appointment, though. Also, if you feel the need for some head-shrinking, here's my colleague's business card." John took the card with a nod. "Do take care of yourself, Chief. We may need you again."

John tilted his head. "Have you heard something I haven't?"

"I have friends still in ONI," Dr. Franco said, worried. "The Brutes aren't being very diplomatic."

"I was afraid of that," John sighed. "If they need me, they know where to find me."

Dr. Franco smiled. "Have a good day, John."

"You, too, Dr. Franco." John pulled his shirt on and let himself out, paying at the front desk for his appointment and then hurrying back to his car. The appointment had only taken half an hour, and he was eager to get back to Rebecca, who promised to have cake in celebration of his very first "civilian duty" as she called it.

John had argued that washing his own clothing had been his first civilian act, but she argued that everyone did that anyway, and going to the doctor for a checkup was a bigger thing. He let her win the argument, of course.

John pulled up to Rebecca's house and got out of the car. Chichi woofed and bounded up with a stick in her mouth; John grinned, wrestled it gently from her, and threw it over the barn. Chichi raced off happily and John stole his way inside.

"God _damn_ it, leave me alone!"

John blinked. That was Rebecca, and she sounded pissed. John carefully crept through the house into the kitchen, where Rebecca was facing the other way, leaning against the breakfast bar and yelling into the phone.

"I don't _care_, dammit. Go crying back to your whore." She paused. "Yes, that's what I meant to call her." She waited again, agitated. "No, I am _not_ sorry for calling your whore a whore." A man's voice on the other side rose in anger. "She's a fucking _whore_, and you're no better!" Rebecca slammed the phone onto the receiver and leaned over, breathing harshly. She wiped her face with one hand and then straightened and went to the fridge. John stayed still, wondering if he should retreat and pretend he didn't hear anything. However, before he could move, Rebecca slammed the fridge door and turned around.

She blinked in surprise when she saw him, forgetting the can of soda in one hand. "John." She said it like she didn't recognize him; John frowned, worried. Rebecca had obviously been crying; her eyes were red. "Did you hear that?" she asked softly.

John nodded, moving forward and pulling her into his chest silently. Rebecca leaned against him, silent tears flowing down her cheeks. "I'm sorry," she murmured. "He shouldn't get to me so badly." We've

been divorced over a year, and he stillâ€¦ Ugh."

"Shhh," John ordered, smoothing her hair down with one hand. "He can't bother you here, Rebecca. I won't let him."

Rebecca smiled slightly up at him. "My Spartan in shining armor," she giggled, wiping a tear from her cheek.

"Something like that," John agreed, drying her face gently on his shirt. "You could change your number."

"I did. He keeps finding out my new one. I don't know how. So I justâ€¦" She shrugged. "Insult him and call it a day. He'll stop, eventually."

"He'd better, or I'm gonna shove his face further up his ass."

Rebecca giggled. "John, that's not very nice. Nor physically possibly."

John smirked. "I'm a Spartan. We make the impossible look easy."

Rebecca laughed. "You always make me feel better."

"I like making you happy."

Rebecca groaned and chuckled all at once. "Don't go all soft now, John. You can't transform into cuddly teddy-bear John until the sun's gone down."

John snorted, letting her go. "I am never a 'cuddly teddy bear,'" he denied.

Rebecca squeaked and giggled, pushing playfully at his chest. "You are and you know it."

"Just because you tend to fall asleep on me doesn't mean I'm a cuddler."

"You're a softie and you know it. Besides, I have cake. But you don't get any unless you're a good Spartan!"

John pouted at her, his eyes twinkling. "That's cruel and unusual punishment."

"Yeah, well, I'm mean like that." Rebecca dug the cake from the fridge and served up two portions, keeping John away from the main cake while she did so. He snuck a finger-full of frosting around her and grinned, eating it before she could take it back.

"Bad boy!" Rebecca gently swatted John's shoulder as she handed him his cake. "How did the appointment go?"

John shrugged, taking a bite of cake before answering. "Good. We talked about some things."

"Like?"

"Birth control, organ failure, balding, mental problems, and the importance of keeping myself limber."

Rebecca blinked. "Covering all your bases, are you?"

"Well, it's important to think about it now. Most of me isn't original, and clones can fail more easily than the original organs. And apparently I'm going to go bald when I'm older. And PTSD is common for soldiers, especially if they're only known the military."

"And the birth control part?"

John smirked. "Well, you know, condoms aren't designed for someone my size."

"Good point," Rebecca agreed, blushing slightly. "Did you discuss the pill?"

"The pill?"

"It's a contraceptive like the condom. You use it before pregnancy becomes a problem. I don't really know how it works."

"Huh."

"Haven't you heard of the pill before?"

John shook his head. "I didn't overhear any conversations about it. And the female Spartans weren't going to ever need itâ€¦ I might have learned about it in training, butâ€¦ I doubt it. We were watched like hawks during the stages of puberty."

"Well, now you know."

John hummed in agreement and finished his cake quickly. He cleaned the dishes as Rebecca went to let Chichi in. They sat down to enjoy a movie, but were quickly distracted as Chichi decided they needed a lap full of dog.

~~Time Warp~~

John stroked Lover Boy's nose as the horse butted him, demanding his breakfast. The former Spartan chuckled and threw a bale of hay easily into the manger, gave him a little bucket of oats, and refilled his water trough. Miss V and Red Rose were already enjoying their food, and the pigs were squealing at each other.

Rebecca was in the house, still waking up; she had had a long night, getting back late from a seminar in Monty about new breeding techniques. Miss V was rounding out as spring approached. Lover Boy had been the lucky stallion the fall before. Rebecca was planning on naming the foal Love of Valentine if it was a colt or Miss Boy if it was a filly.

It was mid-February, and the snow in the yard was hip-deep on Rebecca. Chichi waded through the white fluff gamely, tramping down a path between the front door and her favorite pee-spot in the driveway. John pushed through the snow back to the house, where

Rebecca handed him a mug of warm cocoa and pulled him in quickly to keep the cold air out. He brushed his pants off in the stone entryway and drank the warm liquid gratefully.

Rebecca's phone rang while they were eating breakfast. Rebecca answered it quickly, listening to the person on the other end for a moment before her face became grim. John listened as well, his augmented hearing clearly picking up the man's voice on the other end.

"_I need your help, Becca, and Chichi would be more than welcome," _he was saying. _"And John, too, if you can get him to come along. It's real deep up in the mountains. Tucker says two hikers were supposed to return by sundown yesterday. We gave 'em until this morning just in case, but we need to find 'em. Another storm's comin' in this afternoon."_

"I'll get John and we'll meet you up at Red Mountain, George."

"_Thanks, Becca. And bring warm clothes. We might be out there for a while. They were supposed to stay on Baby Bathtubs, but you know hikers."_

"I know. Thanks. We'll see you in fifteen." She hung up and turned to John.

"I heard," he said before she could speak. "I'd be happy to come along. I need to get some stuff from my house, though." Rebecca nodded. "We'll take the 'Hog; it's better in this deep snow." Her driveway was partially plowed, locking Rebecca's truck into its shed.

"Sounds good. Put on some hot water, will you? We'll bring along some extra cocoa for everyone. It's bitter cold out there." John got up to do as she asked, filling thermoses with hot chocolate mix and then hot water as Rebecca grabbed her warmest clothing, a backpack filled with emergency supplies for trips just like this, and Chichi's harness. Chichi was a trained rescue dog, she explained to John as they piled their gear into the 'Hog. Chichi bounded over and let Rebecca slip the harness onto her. It carried a pair of saddle bags that could be filled with equipment if necessary.

"Let's go," Rebecca said grimly. "It's been below zero for hours." John nodded, drove quickly to his house where he grabbed his warmest clothing, and then drove them to Red Mountain on Rebecca's orders. It took nearly thirty minutes to reach the rendezvous, and they were the last to arrive. Chichi hopped out of the car and greeted everyone before bouncing off into the snow.

"Alright, everyone. We've got two hikers missing. They're supposed to be on Bathtubs. Their names are Jerry and Selena. They're on a honeymoon hike. Let's get them home," George suggested. Everyone donned their gear. George let John take point, since the heavy man would be best to break trail for the rest of the group.

Once they were onto the trail proper, they fanned out, calling the lost hikers' names. John was careful where he stepped, and once floundered in shoulder-deep snow for a moment before digging himself out. He was warm in his winter clothing as the exertion of climbing,

crawling, and plowing through drifts up to six feet deep kept his muscles moving.

They moved forward in a slow line, Chichi occasionally bounding back with nothing to report. She sniffed along the snow, her large paws keeping her mostly on the thick crust that had formed. John broke through it quickly, but he could see some of the team struggling. Rebecca was using a branch to break the snow in front of her, churning it for a moment before taking a step forward. It was very slow progress, and soon John pulled ahead of the group.

They hiked upwards, following the break in the trees for lack of a proper trail. George called a halt after an hour and ordered everyone to drink hot chocolate and make sure they were warm. They began again, eager to find the hikers "alive, hopefully. John was actually grateful when the temperature suddenly plummeted; it was too cold to snow, now.

John stopped suddenly and listened hard. He had heard something, he was sure. He turned his head " there, again. "Stop!" he yelled around him; the search team stopped yelling and listened. Faintly, John heard the noise again. "I hear something," he told the closest person on his right " a man named Wilbur " to pass along. John himself strode forward, angling towards the sound.

"Help!"

The cry was louder, and John fixated on it. He could hear Chichi barking off to his left; she came out of the snow and ran past him, her wide paws letting her walk over the snow more easily.

John worked his way to an overhang. He was only warned of the cliff when the voice below him yelled, "Careful! It's a cliff!"

He stopped and gingerly stepped forward. He knocked snow loose from in front of him and it tumbled down, out of sight. "Are you hurt?" he asked the male voice somewhere below.

"Yes, I think I broke my leg," the man answered, his voice tight with pain.

"Okay. Are you Jerry?"

"Yes! Have you found Selena?"

"Not yet, Jerry. We're looking."

Jerry sobbed quietly as John cleared snow away from the edge. "I fell down and she said she'd go get help" Oh, I hope she's okay."

"I'm sure she's fine, Jerry," John said soothingly. "Can you move?"

"Not much."

"Wave your arms or something." John peeked over the cliff; he spotted Jerry, waving his arms and dressed in a light coat, about sixty feet below him. The remains of a campfire next to the man showed how he had survived the sub-zero temperatures. "I see you."

John surveyed the terrain. It was steep, rocky, and dangerous. He would be seriously injured if he tried to jump down. He pulled a rope from his backpack and started securing it to a thick tree just as the rest of the team arrived.

"Jerry's down there," he told them quickly. "Selena's still missing. He's probably got at least a broken leg."

"We'll look for Selena," George said. "You know how to splint a broken leg?"

"Of course," John answered, testing the rope's knot. "I'll take him back to town when I get him out of there. Chichi ran off that way." He pointed east. "She might be onto Selena's scent."

"Okay." George left a first responder with John and took the rest of the team to find the woman. John quickly rappelled down to Jerry, who looked half-frozen. He had run out of fuel, he explained as John brushed the snow from around him. The cold snow had acted as a blanket, trapping his body heat. His toes were frost-bitten, but they hadn't turned black.

The first responder, who introduced himself as Jeremy, came down and surveyed the situation. "Alright, Jerry, do you remember how you fell?"

Jerry shook his head. "I think I hit my head. All I remember is falling, and then darkness. When I woke up, Selena was screaming up there. I told her to go get help. It was almost dusk."

"You might have a head injury, then," Jeremy said. "John's going to carry you out, okay?" Jerry nodded. "We'll find your wife, never fear. But we need to get you to the hospital."

"I don't want to leave her," Jeremy protested as John bent and carefully picked him up. Jerry hissed with pain as his leg â€" obviously broken, the calf bent at almost a thirty degree angle â€" moved. Jeremy steadied his head and wrapped a blanket over him, tucking in the corners. John adjusted his burden until he was carrying Jerry in one arm.

"You're damn lucky," Jeremy told Jerry as John adjusted. "Your head doesn't look too banged up. John, don't jostle him too much."

"I won't. Just don't wiggle, Jerry."

"What're you gonna do?" Jerry asked, worried.

"Carry you up the cliff," John told him, grabbed the rope in one hand.

"How?" Jerry asked, slightly frightened.

"I'm a Spartan." Jerry was silent for a moment and then murmured his thanks. John pulled himself and Jerry up the rope, making it to the top easily. He was grateful that he hadn't let himself go soft since leaving the battlefield.

John pulled Jeremy and the rope up, untied the rope, and then carried the wounded hiker back to his 'Hog. Jeremy sat with Jerry in the

backseat, holding his head straight just in case his neck was damaged, as John drove them carefully back down the mountain. They met the ambulance at the bottom, and the first responder went with Jerry to make sure he was all right.

John returned to the mountain and followed the team's tracks back to the cliff and then tracked them to the east. The path split several times, and he followed each until they met up again. He finally came upon the group, gathered around Chichi who was barking down into a hole.

"John!" Rebecca spotted him. "Did you get Jerry out?"

"He's in the hospital by now," John assured her. "Just a broken leg, hopefully. What's Chichi doing?"

"She found someone, I think. But we can't get any response. We were about to go down."

"I'll do it," John offered, shrugging off his backpack. "Chichi, move out of the way." John looked down the hole into the blackness beyond. He dug into his backpack and pulled out a flashlight. "Does anyone know what this is?"

"Proolly a mining shaft," George said. "They riddle these mountains. They can collapse under your feet."

"Hmm." John secured the flashlight to his wrist, put on a head lamp, and tossed one end of the rope to George. "Tie that off, would you?" George nodded and tied it to a thick tree about ten feet from the hole, testing the knot with his weight before nodding to John. John dropped into the hole gently, resting his weight on the rope gingerly. It creaked slightly but held, and he turned his attention and flashlights on the surroundings as he climbed down hand-over-hand.

The rock around him was grey and old, weathered. He spotted a faint sparkle â€" probably pyrite. He could see the bottom of the hole fifty feet below him and quickly made it down. He flipped the rope and yelled up, "I'm down!"

"What do you see?" George called back. John looked around, searching carefully. He spotted a faint mark and knelt to examine it closely.

"Drag marks," he called up, puzzled. "Something â€" or someone â€" was dragged here."

"Can you follow them?"

"Yes," John called back, already spotting another. "I need more light, though."

"We're coming down," George told him. The team quickly descended and followed John through the winding tunnel. George pointed out that it was an abandoned mine shaft, and that they should be very careful.

John looked up from the latest drag mark. A young woman was lying, collapsed, on a rock just ahead. Her hair was red, though John

couldn't tell if it was from blood or just her natural hair color. Her skin was a very pale white, her breathing almost nonexistent.

George spotted what John's light had illuminated and yelled for the rest of the team to hurry their butts up. John knelt next to the woman, feeling for a pulse. It was there, but very faint and fluttery. He quickly checked the woman for injury; she had broken both ankles, probably during the fall. Her hair was just red, though her forehead and palms were cut up slightly. Her knees were torn up as well. That explained the drag marks. She had probably passed out from pain.

John took off his outer coat and wrapped it around her. She stirred, groaning softly.

"Are you Selena?" John asked gently. George handed him a mug of hot cocoa; he held it under the woman's nose. She sniffed and woke up, staring at him in confusion and fear. "Are you Selena?" he asked again.

"Yes." Her voice was high with pain. John gently held the hot cocoa up to her; she grabbed it and drank it quickly. "Ohh, that's so goodâ€¦ I think I broke my ankle." She winced as she tried to move; John quickly told her to keep still.

"Both of them," John said with a nod. "Don't worry, we're here to get you out."

"Did you find Jerry?" she asked, suddenly panicked. She relaxed when John nodded and explained where he had been taken. "Oh, thank Godâ€¦" She passed out again, her eyes rolling into her head. John gently took the thermos from her and picked her up, tucking his large jacket around her. The team had mostly filed out of the hole already and waited for him to make the climb one-handed.

"Jerryâ€¦" the woman moaned as John pulled them both out of the hole. He was careful to support her head as he quickly made his way back to the cars. Most of the rescue squad dispersed to their own homes, but Rebecca and George stayed with John on the way back.

They met a second ambulance half-way into town and transferred the woman into the back. She kept moaning for her husband, asking deliriously if he was okay. The EMT assured her that he was alive and well, and then the ambulance drove away, lights flashing.

Rebecca and George said farewell to each other and then John drove himself and Rebecca back to her house. They quickly climbed out of their soaked outer clothing and rubbed Chichi down in a towel. Rebecca started a fire in her ancient hearth as John heated water. They had just sat down in front of the warmth, with Chichi curled on their toes, when snow began to fall.

"It's a good thing we found those hikers before that snow hit," Rebecca said quietly. "They would've been buried otherwise." John nodded, wrapping his large hands around a mug of hot cocoa. "I felt kind of useless, though. Chichi did more than I did."

"You brought hot cocoa," he reminded her.

"Mhm, but you carried two injured hikers out of two different caves."

John smiled at her. "That was just for expediency. You would have handled it just fine without me."

Rebecca hummed thoughtfully. "Is there nothing you can't do?"

John blinked. "Cook," he said instantly. "As you have pointed out several times."

"I'm being serious, John." Rebecca sighed. "You justâ€¦ You do everything perfectly. I don't get how you can be so good at everything."

"I was trained to be," John said simply. "Rescuing a hiker in a frozen cave is no different than getting a wounded Marine out of a battlefield."

Rebecca was silent, staring into the fire. John put a gentle finger under her chin and turned her to look at him. "What's wrong?" he asked, concerned.

"I justâ€¦ I dunno. You're so perfect sometimes, it almost makes me wish you'd make a mistake. You're so controlled, John. Humans make mistakes, it's okay."

"I have to be controlled," he murmured. "If I'm notâ€¦ I could really hurt someone, Rebecca."

"That's not what I mean." Rebecca was clearly frustrated, but not at John. She was trying to explain but couldn't. "You justâ€¦ You never mess up, you know? You know exactly how to handle everything that's thrown at you. Retirement? No problem. You made it work. Sure, with my help, but you didn't need me."

"Yes, I do." John shifted so he was looking into her eyes, utterly serious. "Rebecca, I do need you. I've adjusted to civilian life only because you helped me do so. I couldn't have done it on my own."

"You're doing just fine now," she pointed out, a little sullen.

John blinked. "That's because you've taught me how to behave and react," he told her.

Rebecca didn't answer, looking back into the fire. John was worried; she didn't usually get bad mood swings. He counted in his head â€" she was due for a cycle soon, but her usual warning signs were cramps and headaches, not moodiness.

"You're so perfect, it makes me feelâ€¦ I dunno. Clumsy, I guess. Unnecessary." Rebecca glanced at him. "Like today. You rescued two people and all I did was bring hot chocolate and Chichi."

"I wouldn't have even been on the team if you hadn't brought me along," John reminded her. Rebecca nodded slightly, conceding the point. "But I understand how you feel. I got it a lot in the military, too. We're just so damn good at things, we make others look inferior." He sighed quietly. "I can't help that. I can't change

who I am, Rebecca."

"I know." Rebecca chewed her nail. "I don't want you to, either. I justâ€¦ Wish you'd make a mistake every once in a while. It's only human."

John concealed a slight wince. His humanity had been a sore topic in the military, and he still didn't like it being questioned. "I'll make sure to break something," he joked, trying to lighten the mood. Rebecca saw right through it but smiled anyway.

"I have a few ugly vases I would love to get rid of," she admitted.

"It's a date," John declared.

They were silent for a long time, just watching the fire as it burned. Rebecca stood to put more wood on as dusk fell and they turned on a movie to fall asleep to, the woman exhausted from the day. Though John didn't want to fall asleep in her house â€" he had his own, just down the road â€" she insisted, saying she'd feel better knowing he wasn't out in the blizzard that had kicked up around them. The Spartan, aware that the woman knew he could make it back perfectly fine, agreed to stay with her, serving as a pillow when Rebecca succumbed to sleep. Chichi fell asleep at their feet, warming their toes.

~~Time Warp~~

Weeks passed â€" John was mobbed by reporters daily and had learned how to sneak his way between Rebecca's house and his, through the woods. However, one reporter had managed to spot him helping Rebecca with repairing her greenhouse roof and, subsequently, the poor woman hadn't had peace from the reporters either.

"If they don't get off my property, _I'm_ going on a rampage."

"Rampage?" John asked with a chuckle, firmly closing the door behind him as they ignored â€" again â€" the flock of reporters tip-toeing the line between gravel driveway â€" which was public-private property until Rebecca put up warning signs â€" and the lawn â€" which was private property.

"Camera rampage," Rebecca explained flippantly. "You'd think the snow would drive them off."

"And they've got to be tired of watching us feed the animals by now," John agreed, turning on the fire place without being asked. Two feet of snow had dumped overnight, which made Rebecca nervous about her greenhouse roof collapsing, so he had come over in the middle of a blizzard â€" hoping to give the reporters stationed 24/7 at the end of his driveway the slip â€" to shovel it off for her.

"I think Lover Boy likes the attention," the woman snickered. "But, seriously, I'm going to go on a rampage. They should know better than to mess with a woman during her blood moon."

John didn't ask â€" he'd never heard it phrased that way before, but it seemed appropriate. He remembered the first time the female

Spartans had received their menstrual cycles â€" an event that had left _all_ men in the compound fleeing the camp. They had all started at the same time, too, meaning that training had been halted for a day while medics tried to battle the raging hormones coursing through dozens of girls. They got it under control, finally, but after that, every fourth Monday was "Bloody Hell" day, celebrated by the murderous looks in the female Spartan's eyes and the caution of any male creature within a fifty-foot radius.

After the first week, however, all of the girls had learned to control themselves and the situation wasn't nearly as dire the next month. It was still unpleasant, however. Due to their conditioning, most of the female Spartans were downright vicious â€" but a select few responded with lethargy. Their training calmed their body's reactions, however, and the medics intervened when necessary.

"Chichi!" Rebecca called. The dog woofed from upstairs â€" they had had to lock her in the house because she kept trying to make friends with the reporters â€" and ran down to get her own breakfast. She had clearly forgiven both of the humans for leaving her inside because she leapt up onto John, who smiled and ruffled her fur, and licked Rebecca's hand as her human put down her food. "There you go, girl. Breakfast!"

John heard the water boiling and slid past Rebecca smoothly to pour them both mugs of hot water â€" to Rebecca's, he added instant coffee, and to his, a tea bag. "To snow storms," he said solemnly, lifting his mug. The woman giggled and clinked her mug against his carefully.

"And to frostbitten reporters!"

"Now, now," John scolded, grinning. "They'd probably sue if they got frostbite."

"Oh, yeah." Rebecca frowned. "Fine. To cold reporters!"

"I'll drink to that." They clipped mugs again and John wrapped his large hand around the mug, letting the warmth seep into his fingers. "What's on the agenda today?" he asked as they settled on the couch in front of the fire, the blinds drawn tightly against the cold and zooming camera lenses.

"Miss V has a check up with Doc. I'm going to clip Missy's bristles. You?"

John shook his head slightly. "I promised Mayor Riddle I'd speak at the Remembrance Celebration tomorrow. I need to prepare for that."

"Well, let's hear it!" Rebecca shooed him with one hand. He lifted an eyebrow. "Your speech, let's hear it!"

"I usually wing it," he admitted. "I don't generally do speeches."

Rebecca shook her head slightly. "Alright, then, wing it."

John shrugged and stood, clearing his throat and then facing her with

a slight smile, clearly controlling his facial expressions to appear serious yet not intimidating. "I'll have been introduced by the mayor and he'll step down to allow me the podium," he started.

"That's a horrible speech," Rebecca teased. The Spartan rolled his eyes slightly, grinning.

"Well, I haven't started yet."

"Then get on with it!"

John cocked an eyebrow and then smoothed his face again, pretending to adjust the microphone. "Good afternoon, everyone." He felt slightly self-conscious, speaking to a "crowd" of one person and one dog. "Today, we remember our fallen â€" our sisters and brothers, comrades in arms. We remember the billions killed in a senseless war, many of them victims of Covenant glassing. Though we mourn their passing, we would disappoint them if we did not take this opportunity to remember them as they were alive. A good friend once told me that remembering someone for who they are, not for how they died, is vital to honoring their memory. My family gave their lives defending humanity, as did many of yours. Their sacrifice will never be forgotten, and their spirits will live on through us as we rebuild humanity and take back what is ours." John paused, reading Rebecca's reaction â€" she gave him a thumbs up and he continued.

"This day, March 3, 2555, will forever be known as Remembrance Day, when we recall our loved ones who fell defending their loved ones, their teams, and humanity. We remember their duty and the price they paid to fulfill it â€" and we remember their laughter, not their cries; we remember their tears of joy, not of sorrow; we remember their vital selves, not their deaths. It is truly a celebration of who they were and how they came to be humanity's heroes. And make no mistake â€" every single person who died defending Earth and humanity is a hero.

"One thing I learned from my years of service is that no one person can change the tide of war. It takes dozens, even hundreds, of men and women brave enough to face impossible odds. Some get more recognition, but no admiral can ever claim to have driven off a Covenant fleet without a crew of the tough-as-nails Naval personnel. No ground commander can say they took back a city without recognizing their ODSTs and ground-pounding Marines. And I cannot claim victories without acknowledging my brothers and sisters, the very system that built me, and every single UNSC soldier.

"The Spartan-II program was built entirely on the concept of brother- and sister-hood. We were trained to protect â€" it has been, and always will be, my honor and duty to serve humanity. Though my brothers and sisters cannot be here, they would share my sentiments. The greatest gift any of us received was the ability to protect our kind from deadly threats. We are Spartans, and we will never rest while humanity is in danger. Humanity will rebuild, and it will take all of us to do it. So remember your loved ones, your friends and family, but remember them happily and build to honor their sacrifice."

"That sounded corny at the end," John said after a moment.

"I like it. Sounded very affirming and righteous," Rebecca disagreed,

smiling.

"Well, thank you." John took a seat. "Overall?"

"A nine out of ten," Rebecca decided. "I'm not a great public speaker, though. You should talk to Cortana â€" maybe she has some tips for you."

John nodded slightly. "I'll keep that in mind. Do you need help with Missy today?"

Rebecca glanced at the clock. "If you wouldn't mind. Doc's going to be here at two, so we've got a couple hours to get it done. It'll take that long anyway."

The Spartan nodded and took her mug to wash it out while Rebecca changed into old pants and a shirt. "Ready?" she asked, standing at the back door. Thankfully, the walk between this door and the barn was shielded by the house from the reporters, so they could at least travel back and forth in peace.

"Ready." John joined her and they hurried into the barn, brining Chichi with them this time. John bolted the barn door behind them and Rebecca disappeared into the tack room for the tools she needed.

It took nearly an hour to finish the job â€" John got bit once, and Rebecca nearly lost a finger, but Missy was finally cut back down the proper bristle length. The woman left the pen and the Spartan nimbly held the pig down for a moment and then leapt fluidly out of the stall as Missy tried to come after him again.

"Why is she so poorly behaved?" John asked curiously, eyeballing the purpling bruise on his hand. He had managed to keep the pig from breaking his skin, but her jaws had still snapped down with enough force to make it hurt. "The boars don't hate being clipped nearly so much."

"She's a sow." Rebecca shrugged. "I don't really know. She's never been abused, that I know of. She's just mean, I guess. But she makes good piglets, I'll give her that." Missy grunted as if she understood; John tossed a handful of treats into her pen, hoping that she'd remember getting them after a clipping next time they did it.

"Boys' turns," Rebecca said cheerfully, hopping into Rob's pen first. "Good boy, Rob," she crooned as the Spartan joined her and held the pig still while Rebecca went to work. Rob, however, enjoyed the attention â€" and the absence of the bullying sow â€" and leaned into the grooming, grunting and squealing. Next came Flipper's turn and, like Rob, the boar enjoyed every moment of attention.

Rebecca was just wiping the shears clean from a sanitizing bath when Doc knocked at the barn door. John unbolted it and let him into the well-lit interior, though the sun bouncing off the snow rendered the vet momentarily blind as he stepped inside.

"Good afternoon, John," Doc said, offering his hand. The taller man shook it gently. "How are you?" The vet took off his winter coat and hung it on a post near the door.

"I've been well, Doc. Yourself?"

"Can't complain, can't complain. That's a nasty bruise you've got there."

"We were clipping Missy," Rebecca called from the tack shed. Doc nodded grimly, clearly experienced with the sow's nature. "Come on in, Doc. Miss V's in stall five."

"Oh, excellent." Doc smiled at John and hurried to check his patient. Miss V snorted a greeting, her sides rounding out with the foal she carried. "You're looking marvelous, Miss V," Doc complimented as he stepped inside. "Beautiful. Did Rebecca do your mane especially for me?"

John leaned against the stable door, watching as Doc continued murmuring compliments to the pregnant horse and ran his hands over her back, sides, and legs. He set up a small ultrasound kit and checked on the foal with the tiny screen. Rebecca joined them just as he started.

"Oh, what beautiful legs," Doc sighed, holding the screen up so the two humans outside the door could see. "See that, right there?" He pointed to a small fuzzy white object on the screen that moved. "That's the foal's heart. And it looks good, too â€" normal development at this stage. She's all turned about, but that's natural at this stage. Miss V looks right on track. Yes, you're a good mother, aren't you?" Doc stroked Miss V's velvet nose as he packed up his equipment with one hand in a practiced manner. "Keep feeding her supplements and make sure she doesn't get overly stressed," Doc told Rebecca. "You've done this before. Let me know when time comes. I want to be here for it."

Rebecca nodded. "Thanks, Doc." The vet handed Rebecca the bill, who paid it quickly using her bank card and saw him to the barn door. The man paused to say hello to Lover Boy and Rose Red, who whickered in friendly greeting, and then shrugged on his coat again and let himself back into the white world outside.

14. The Plot Thickens

****_Please note: I just now realized that I didn't upload Chapter 2: A New Start. Please read that, as it will make the rest of the story make a lot more sense! I apologize.
>

****Chapter 13:** **The Plot Thickens****

"Mr. Leonidas, over here!" a reporter jogged up to where John was sitting on a log. The Spartan glanced up and narrowed his eyes consciously. "Don't give me that, you're on public land."

John glanced around â€" he had crossed into public land some time ago, hiking into the woods in the hopes to get away from humanity for a while. It was bitter cold â€" too chilly to snow â€" and still the man had followed him. He was holding a camera in one hand, fully gloved, and a microphone was clipped to the edge of his hood.

"And you are in danger," the Spartan replied, noting the blue on the

man's lips. "You should learn to recognize the signs of hypothermia if you're going to track me in this weather." He stood, brushing the back of his snow pants off.

The reporter waved his hand flippantly. "He who does not suffer, does not gain!"

It was times like these that an incessant little voice in John's head piped up with very unhelpful comments. _Just leave him. He deserves it._

As a human and a Spartan, though, John knew he would never allow that. The reporter certainly deserved frostbite, both for being stupid enough to track down a Spartan who didn't want to be found and for coming into the Rocky Mountains without proper gear, but every human was precious nowadays â€" even ones who pissed his rescuer off.

The Spartan began walking back towards the main road, which was closer than his house. The reporter followed after a brief hesitation. "So, John, tell me about yourself." He had to jog to keep up with the larger man, but the exercise would do him good â€" keep him warm.

"I appreciate silence." It wasn't exactly a subtle hint, but John hoped the thick-skulled reporter would understand.

"So you're a loner. That matches with Spartans so far as I know. Do you like to be quiet and think or do you prefer noise when you're alone?" John shook his head slightly and decided not to answer. "You might as well answer, since we're out here. I'm not going to stop asking. That's why I got assigned to this job. I'm very persuasive."

The Spartan allowed the man to continue yabbering, shutting it out like he did a Marine's pained screams and concentrating solely on wandering through the forest.

"Are you a bachelor? You'd have to be, being so long in the militaryâ€¦ Tell me, if you were raised in the military, do you even know anything about sexual intercourse? Or courting? Did your training leave you intact? Or did they decide that you didn't need a gender and removed it entirely? No, that doesn't fit, I've seen the Spartan females â€" they have breasts. Unless that's just for show? Was there love between Spartans, Chief?"

That made John raise an eyebrow. This reporter knew no bounds, it seemed. He ducked beneath a snow-covered branch and idly kicked the tree as he passed; it unloaded directly on top of the reporter. It was petty and childish, but hearing the reporter sputter and curse as the cold snow dripped through his inadequate jacket made John feel a little less violated.

"Keep up," he called back. "It's just snow."

"Cold-ass snow," the reporter muttered. "Come on, Master Chief. Throw me a bone here. I tracked you all the way out here just to get some information from you."

"You tracked me out here to further your own career and feed the

public. I'm a human, not a toy for you to play with."

"See, but that's the thing. Your humanity is what makes you so amazing."

John blinked. _What_?

"You know? You've survived thousands of battles in which the majority of the ground troops and civilians perished. You were lost in space and rescued by the _Arbiter_ himself. You and Cortana destroyed the first Halo and the Flood. You're a hero and a legend. My kids will tell their grandkids stories about you." There was clear worship in the reporter's voice.

John grunted. "All I did was serve, same as everyone else." The Spartan carefully made his way down a steep hill, slick with ice.

"No, you did so much more than that." The reporter picked his way down as well. "You saved millions of lives."

The larger man shook his head. "I didn't do it alone."

"Of course not." The reporter slid the last few feet to the bottom and fluffed up his jacket slightly. "The other Spartans helped, of course. But you were in the lime light. You _are_ the Master Chief; yours is the voice humanity recognizes as their hero's."

"I'm also a man looking for a normal life," John pointed out.

The reporter had a grin to his voice when he answered, which made the Spartan grind his teeth in frustration. "Celebrities can't be choosers. You could always go back to the UNSC. What made you retire anyway? No room for Spartans anymore? Replaced by the fours?"

"The Spartan-IV program will go very well. They'll be a credit to humanity."

"You didn't answer my question."

"Was it that obvious?" John shook his head. "The only reason I'm responding to you at all is to keep you moving and your mind off of the cold that is numbing your nose, fingers, and toes right now, because you didn't wear the proper outdoor gear for this weather and climate."

"Oh." The reporter obviously stopped and took inventory of himself for a moment. "Well, damn, I am getting cold. How much longer until we're out of here?"

"A couple more miles."

"Great! I should have plenty of time for more questions, then." The Spartan sighed, his breath making a frozen cloud in front of his face as he pushed aside a pile of brush and held it back for the man to walk through. "So, how are you adjusting to civil life? Done your own laundry yet?"

"A Spartan is trained to excel in many aspects of life," John said without answering. "Including unforeseen circumstances."

"Had some trouble then, have we? Your neighbor â€" Rebecca, isn't it? â€" wouldn't have anything to do with the apparently remarkable job you've done so far in moving to civil life, would she?"

"You all need to stay away from her," John growled.

"Touched a nerve?" the reporter teased. "Are you interested, John? According to her records, she's been divorced for a year. Perfect time to move in â€" big, strong man like you, make her safe from the world? Yes, she'd like that, I bet."

John nearly left the reporter right then and there. The snow would cover the bodies for several weeks, after all. "I'm not interested in courting Rebecca. The reason you all should stay away is that she doesn't like it. You ought to respect her wishes â€" and mine â€" and not come hounding after me even though it may cost you your life."

"A Spartan is incapable of allowing a human to die."

John snorted. "A fact I was unaware of."

"Have you killed humans before?" the reporter asked, curiously.

The Spartan frowned. He'd let his frustration get to him and given the reporter ammunition against him. "Whether I have or not is classified."

"So you have?"

John shook his head. This reporter was trying to put words in his mouth. "I'm not able to confirm or deny ever having killed a human."

"Have you ever done anything that would result in the death of a human â€" directly?"

John raised an eyebrow. "You're asking the same question, you're going to get the same answer."

"One can try. So, tell me, what _is_ your favorite food?"

That was one John was comfortable answering. Maybe it'd help this fellow and his bloodthirsty kin to lay off. "Cake."

The man stopped and then ran to catch up when the Spartan didn't wait for him. "Seriously? Cake? What kind of cake?"

The larger man shook his head. "All kinds."

"I would think sugar would be bad for you, high metabolism and allâ€" What about your favorite savory food? Like, what do you eat for breakfast?"

John raised an eyebrow. "You've gotten one answer. That's it."

"Do you even eat breakfast?"

"Yes. It's an important meal of the day."

"How many calories do you consume daily? You've got to eat a lot, to keep that much muscle workingâ€|"

John shrugged. He didn't keep count â€" he ate when he was hungry.

"Okayâ€| Do you like to sleep with or without the lights on?"

The Spartan preferred the lights to be on â€" they mimicked the emergency lights on a ship when he was allowed a rare few hours of real sleep. It also allowed him to sleep more easily, knowing he could see an intruder if they came in. But he'd be damned if he was going to tell this pushy reporter.

"Do you see a counselor for your PTSD?"

"Who said I have PTSD?" John asked, raising an eyebrow.

"You have all the symptoms. You don't keep company much. I've seen you interact with less than a dozen people in all the weeks I've been assigned to your case; mostly Rebecca. Your house stays lit well after the normal time most people go to sleep. I think you have mood swings, but you hide them â€" 'cause you're a Spartan and Spartans aren't supposed to feel things. You zone out sometimes, like when you're lifting weights."

John growled. "And how would you even be able to know that?"

"Trade secret. Nothing illegal." The reporter smirked. "Are you going to answer my question?"

"No."

"Is that an answer or a refusal to answer?"

John didn't answer, too deep in thought. Could he be suffering from PTSD and not even know it? He had nightmares every night, it was true that he tended to zone out while doing mundane chores. He resolved to check with his doctor and put drapes on the windows of his weight-lifting room. They faced the road; perhaps the reporters were using telephoto lens.

They broke into the road; a van was waiting for them, ringed by several reporters. The man who had followed the Spartan into the woods climbed into the back of the car, clearly eager to give his report and drink something warm.

The rest of the reporters, however, mobbed their target.

"John, why did you go out into the woods today? Trouble with PTSD? Did you need to get away from it all?" Clearly, this woman didn't understand the concept of wanting to be alone.

"Over here! What did you tell Frank?" Frank, John surmised, was the name of the reporter he had escorted out of the woods.

"Are you and Rebecca dating?"

John waved them off and turned down the road, breaking into a quick

jog and then into a sprint, letting the air flow around him and calm his mind. There was a token force waiting at his driveway; he plowed through them quickly and walked to his house, stomping through the snow.

It angered him, that these people had nothing better to do than try to pry into his life at every opportunity. They could be rebuilding or dedicating their powers to helping humanity understand that an alliance with the Sangheili was necessary. Instead of mobbing him, they could be helping the thousands of children evacuated from glassed planets find homes and parents. But he was big news " and it galled him to think he had more air time than all of the brass in the UNSC combined, not counting their big press conferences. Cortana had dropped that little tidbit of information on him, which had prompted the hike in the first place.

Sighing slightly to himself, using his training to calm his mind once more, the Spartan unlocked his door and walked into the warm, empty house, putting his shoes carefully on the mat and then stripping off his outer wear and hanging it up to dry. He crossed the room into the kitchen, put on a pot of tea, and dropped the blinds on the house. When the tea was ready, he poured himself a cup, grabbed a book from a pile on the table, and sat on the couch to read and get lost in the world of science fiction again.

~~Time Warp~~

John held Miss V's head, stroking her muzzles gently. She panted, straining. Rebecca tied her tail to keep it clean and out of the way. Doc felt along the mare's stomach and nodded. "The foal's turned. We should be seeing it soon."

John murmured soothingly as Miss V whinnied in distress, front feet kicking. Doc nimbly avoided the hooves and rejoined Rebecca at the horse's tail. "Come on, girl," Doc called encouragingly. One stall over, Lover Boy whickered. Just beyond him, Red Rose pawed at his stall door, reminding them that he hadn't had his breakfast.

Suddenly, with a wet squelch, Rebecca's lap was filled with the front legs of a foal. She tugged on them gently, helping Miss Valentine. The foal came forth in fits and starts, its coat dark from the wetness. John patted Miss V's neck as she heaved in and out and gave a final push. The foal landed on Rebecca's lap, who quickly scooted back and started wiping him down, clearing his eyes, ears, and nose so he could breathe. Doc stayed by Miss V until the bloody sack was expelled as well, and then told John to let her go.

She rolled onto her stomach, searching for her foal. Rebecca gently brought the tiny horse to her head; the foal was just opening its eyes as Miss V gave it a giant lick, reassuring herself that the foal was alive and well. It gave a tiny whinny as Miss V heaved herself to her hooves, swishing her tail.

Doc untied her tail quickly and suggested they let mother and foal bond. John went to feed the two stallions while Rebecca watched the foal, completely smitten already.

"What's the little tyke's name?" Doc asked with a chuckle at her expression.

"It's a filly," Rebecca said. "So her name's Miss Boy."

"That'll cause some confusion," Doc laughed approvingly. "I'll take care of the necessary paperwork, Becca. Keep her warm; it's not quite warm enough for her to be outside."

"Alright. Thanks, Doc."

"Have a good day, now. John." He dipped his head in a farewell; John waved, fending off the sow with one hand as she tried to take a chunk out of his leg for ignoring her woefully unfed state. He quickly left her pellets in her dish and escaped the pen.

"She's perfect," Rebecca sighed, smiling at the foal. It was May, a little early for the foal to be born, but the barn was heated and it all gone smoothly. "When she's walking, we'll move them into the other stall so I can clean this one out."

"Okay," John said. It was an entirely new experience for him. He was slightly horrified at the obvious pain and exertion it had taken on the part of Miss V. "Is it like that for humans?" he asked Rebecca, leaning against the stall door gently.

Rebecca chuckled at the slight pity in his voice. "It can be. But we have ways of making the mother numb during birth, so it's less painful. It still hurts a lot, though. Most maternity wards are built out of sound-proof rooms."

John snorted. "I've been hurt before, but that just looks _painful_."

"It is," Rebecca said. "Some people think it's so painful because it's supposed to encourage mother-baby bonding. So they don't get numbed."

John shook his head. "Women. I'll never understand." Rebecca grinned and shoved him playfully. "Especially _you_," he teased, ruffling her hair.

The filly interrupted them as she tried to lurch to her feet. John watched, perplexed but also slightly entranced. Miss Boy lurched about before falling down, and then tried again. She finally stood long enough to stumble towards her mother's teats before falling down again. Miss V whickered encouragingly and the filly lurched upwards again, drawn by the need to suckle. She finally made it upright and started sucking quickly. Miss V flattened her ears momentarily before nuzzling her daughter's side gently with her nose.

"Don't fillies have teeth?" John asked, imagining the damage the foal could do to her mother. Rebecca laughed.

"Yes, they do. And no, human babies are born without teeth. But once they start teething, they can make it very painful for the mother."

"The whole process just seemsâ€¦ Messy." John found that he didn't even know how to describe it, but Rebecca seemed amused.

"That's because you're a guy," she told him haughtily. "To women,

it's the most amazing thing in the world. After it's over."

Rebecca sighed and leaned into John happily, watching the foal explore her new world. She kicked up her heels a little and promptly fell flat on her long face with a squeal. Miss V nosed her urgently and she stood up again, unhurt.

Rebecca yawned. It had been an early morning; she had been expected Miss V to drop at any moment, and had checked on her every hour during the night, despite John's offer to do so. By 1 AM, she had given up "as had John, who had stayed for emotional support" and moved a blanket, chair, and flashlight into the barn.

"Tired?" John asked, voice deep just behind her ear. "Why don't you go back to bed?"

"Mmmmm!" The proposal was tempting. "I think I ought to." Rebecca yawned again and smiled slightly at John. "Why aren't you tired?"

John shrugged. "I'm used to little sleep. I'll sleep deeper tonight for it. Would you like to come over for dinner tonight?" Rebecca nodded and let him guide her into bed, where she collapsed and quickly fell asleep. John watched as she snored lightly, snuggling into the pile of pillows she insisted were necessary with a small smile on her face.

Jon snuck out of the house silently, quieting Chichi's woof of greeting with a gesture. He jogged quickly to his house and found his cell phone. He didn't usually carry it with him, since no one called him, but as he flipped it open, he noticed a missed call. It was from Cortana.

Perfect, he thought, redialing the number.

"Well, finally!" Cortana's voice greeted him. She sounded a little frustrated. "I'm supposed to be able to contact you, John. I can't do that if you're forgetting your cell phone."

"Leaving it behind was intentional," he told her. She sighed. "What do you need?"

"More like what do you need? I was calling to check on you. I haven't heard from you in almost a week. How's life?"

"Good. Miss Valentine " Rebecca's mare " gave birth to a beautiful filly this morning."

"Oh, how fun. And how is the filly?"

"She seems strong. Her name is Miss Boy; her dam is Miss Valentine, her sire is Lover Boy."

"What will Rebecca do with her?"

"I think she's going to raise her. She has two stallions and a mare " it would make more sense to have two mares and a stallion, or even two mares and two stallions. But I'm not entirely sure." The Spartan leaned against the counter, idly staring at the piles of snow still in his back yard.

"Yes, that would be more efficient, wouldn't it? I see you're due for another snowstorm fairly soon here."

"I haven't checked the weather forecast, but that would make sense. Spring's going to have a hard time this year."

Cortana hummed on the other line. "You sound like you're doing well. Keep in touch, okay? Oh, and John?"

"Yes?"

"Don't forget your phone next time."

John hung up with a chuckle, feeling suddenly confident again. He grabbed a bottle of water and headed up to his weight room, deciding that lifting something heavy would help clear his mind. He spent two hours there, working out and managing to break a thin sweat.

However, just as he was about to go clean himself up, his cell phone rang. He picked it up quickly, checking the caller ID. He didn't recognize the number and frowned slightly, answering courteously, "This is John."

"John, this is Admiral Hood." Something in the tone of his voice made John stand up straighter.

"Sir." He waited.

On the other end, Admiral Hood sighed quietly. He hated to do this, especially since Cortana told him that the Chief had really just started to integrate himself into civilian life. "I have some bad news. Are you available right now?"

John glanced at the clock on the wall in front of him. "Yes, sir."

"Good— Good— I don't know how to tell you this, son."

"I'm being called in, aren't I?" John asked quietly.

Admiral Hood could hear the determination in his voice — but there was something else. He realized, with a start, that it was unhappiness. He turned to Cortana, raising an eyebrow; she motioned for him to answer John. "Yes— We need you, John."

"I understand, sir. What mission?"

"The Brutes have called for a talk about peace with us. It's probably a ruse — and we'd like to have you there just in case. They respect you, even if they hate your guts. I want you to lead the new Hybrid teams we've been cooking up — they're a mix of human and Elites."

"I understand, sir."

"We'll be traveling for at least a week either way. I doubt the talks will last beyond the first day, but we'll be prepared to spend a week if necessary."

"Yes, sir."

"I will be there in the morning â€" we'll retrieve you and then dock with the _Blade_. Your armor arrives tonight. I'll brief you fully on the way up."

"Yes, sir." John's voice was the one Hood remembered from the years of war â€" constrained, guarded, and deep. It was the voice that had sent crowds cheering and soldiers crying in relief. He cut the connection and sighed, rubbing his face with one hand.

"I hate that we have to do this," Hood muttered to Cortana.

The AI glowed a soft blue as she answered. "He'sâ€¦ He's a Spartan, sir. He knows it's his duty."

"I know, Cortana. Butâ€¦ I wish there was another way."

"There isn't. We both know that. The Spartan-IVs don't have the same reputation, and they're spread out a lot anyway. The Brutes respect the Chief, even if they do hate him and try to eat his face every time they see him. His mere presence will shift the talks in our favor."

"He sounded different," Hood remarked curiously, recalling John's voice when he had first answered the phone. He quickly revised his thinking â€" perhaps John was acting like he would have had he not been trained as a soldier for most of his life.

Cortana paused and then smiled slightly, her voice soft. The data symbols running down her body slowed slightly. "John's in love."

Hood blinked and leaned back in his chair, staring at Cortana. "Are you serious?"

"Yes, sir. He just doesn't know it yet."

"Godâ€¦ Now I _really_ feel bad."

"Don't, Terrence. He wouldn't want to be left out of this mission, and he isn't willing to admit it to himself yet, I think. Least of all to Rebecca. Besides, he'll just be there as deterrent."

"You know how deterrents work," Hood said miserably. "Rebecca, huh?"

"A wonderful woman," Cortana praised.

"Oh?"

Cortana smirked slightly. "We've met, sort of. I keep tabs on John through her, because he sometimes doesn't know if something's wrong with him. But I did manage to convince him to start visiting the doctor every few months, to keep an eye on his organs."

"How well-adjusted is he?" Terrence asked, frowning slightly.

"Very well, sir," Cortana answered quietly. "He has been able to make

friends more quickly than I calculated. He is integrated into the community â€" they accept and protect him as one of their own. It is quite fascinating."

"Will coming back ruin that?"

Cortana shook her head. "It's very temporary â€" we'll be gone for three weeks at the most. One week there, one week to talk, one week back. We'll make some headway and let them stew for a while, knowing the Demon is still alive and on our side. He should integrate back in right away, especially with Rebecca's help." She smiled wickedly.

"Let's hope so," Hood sighed, turning to his desk. "Now, let's recheck these supply manifests."

The two discussed their tactics on the station as John stared at the clock on the wall. It seemed to mock him now. _Whatcha gonna do, Spartan? How will you break _this _to her?_

John sighed in frustration and went to take a shower. He was expecting Rebecca soon. They rarely spent time here. He quickly called the local delivery place and ordered food for two as he gathered a clean set of clothing. John let the hot water run over him and calmed himself forcefully as he dried off and pulled on his clothing.

The delivery guy came with the food â€" John paid for it and then put it in the oven to keep it warm. He had ordered fresh chicken breasts with garden salads and linguine â€" for dessert, Rebecca always kept his fridge stocked with cake. It looked delicious already and John's stomach reminded him that he hadn't taken a break to eat since yesterday evening, when Rebecca called to ask him to attend Miss V with her.

He could hear Chichi barking as she led Rebecca up the driveway. He met Rebecca at the door and she smiled at him.

"Well, good evening, sir," she said playfully. "I hope I'm not late."

"Not at all." John smiled, closed the door, and ruffled Chichi's fur. "Dinner's ready."

"And it smells delicious!" Rebecca said, obviously surprised.

John chuckled. "I know better than to cook myself," he admitted. "I ordered in."

"Oooo, edible food," she teased. "You know how to spoil a girl."

John smirked and pulled out her chair for her. She sat down, waited for him to be seated, and they dug in, talking and laughing as they ate. The snow wasn't letting go â€" spring was fighting tooth and nail to take hold. Rebecca chattered about her plans for the spring.

"What did you do today?" she asked curiously.

"I did some chores â€" laundry, stuff like that." John shrugged slightly.

"What else? Your whole day couldn't have been chores?"

John smiled slightly, though the smile didn't reach his eyes. Rebecca scowled at him.

"You know I hate being left in the dark," she told him, playfully tossing a pea at his forehead. "Tell me!"

John leaned back and caught the pea in his mouth, making a great show of being silent. Rebecca threw another pea, and he caught it again â€" though Chichi was looking interested at the food being thrown.

"You better tell me or it's no cake for you tonight!" she threatened, waving her fork. John grinned.

"Do you really want to know?"

"No, I'm threatening you because I like it. Yes, I want to know!" Rebecca told him sarcastically, grinning.

"I've been called back into the UNSC."

Rebecca blanched and paled, setting down her fork. "When? I thought you retired."

John shook his head slightly. "Temporarily. But they need me again, for the Brute talks. I don't know how long I'll be gone." Or if I'll return, he thought to himself. "My armor should arrive tonight."

"So soon?"

John nodded, carefully. "I didn't want to go without letting you know," he admitted quietly. "I may not return."

"You'll return," Rebecca said fiercely, locking eyes with the Spartan. "If you don't, I'm going to kick your ass to Hell myself. Got that?"

John smiled slightly, but he wasn't amused. "Rebecca, you know Brutes; they're -"

"Shut up," the woman growled, clutching her glass so hard that the man was worried she'd break it and cut herself. "You have way too much here to give it all up so easily," she continued testily.

"Rebecca, I'm a Spartan â€" it's my duty." Rebecca shook her head; John leaned over and gently took her chin in one hand, making her look at him. "I didn't expect you to react like this." He sounded contrite, and a little lost.

"Yeah, well, when you go to dinner with someone you lâ€™| Like, you're not expecting them to tell you something like this! It's as if you came over to take care of the animals and I told you I was going into surgery for a life-threatening condition tomorrow, and oh, yeah, I

might not survive." Rebecca was clearly upset, her voice at least two notes higher than normal.

"I have to go."

"I know, I know." She sighed, pulling her chin from John's grasp gently. "I justâ€¦ I hate that you have to."

"I'm glad," he said honestly. Her head snapped up, glaring. John blinked.

"Oh, so you like suicide missions, is that it?" she hissed. "Never mind what you're leaving behind, no, you'll go play with some Brutes."

John winced slightly. His last "play date" with a Brute had nearly ended in a Spartan fatality. "I meant that I'm glad to be going back to a life I know," he stressed, reaching for her hand. Not only could he check her pulse but she seemed to appreciate physical contact while they talked about something serious. However, she pulled her hand back and set it in her lap, a clear warning. The Spartan sighed slightly â€" women.

"I'm just going to be a guard. They'll do lots of talking, get nowhere, and I'll be home before Miss Boy is running in the pastures," John said, not liking that he was sugar-coating the truth â€" that, if it came to it, he would sacrifice himself for the good of humanity. However, he sensed that Rebecca needed to hear him say it.

"You better," Rebecca muttered. "We can't lose our last Spartan." John smiled bitterly, but she didn't catch the expression as she looked up, her eyes shining. "You mean too much."

He tilted his head slightly. He thought about making a joke of it, but something told him not to â€" and he had learned to listen to that voice more than once. "You won't even notice I'm gone," he said instead.

Rebecca shook her head, losing the battle as tears began creeping down her cheeks. "All my hard workâ€¦ You have to promise you won't let it change you, John. You have to come back. You, not the Spartan side. It can come back, too, butâ€¦ You know what I mean."

John gently pulled her into a hug, scooting their chairs together, and stroked her hair and back soothingly. "I'll come back," he promised. "I always keep my promises."

They were interrupted a few minutes later by a knock at the door. John got up and pulled the door open â€" the man in Navy uniform on the other side saluted. "Master Chief Sierra-117?" he asked, though there was obviously little doubt who else could be answering the call.

John nodded, snapping back a salute easily, reading the PFC's tags. "Private McDonald. You have my MJOLNIR?"

"Yes, sir," the private answered, handing him a clipboard. "Cleaned and refurbished. The brass wanted you looking your bestâ€¦"

sir."

John glanced through the repairs and upgrades they had made to his suit. He nodded and signed the forms and the private initialed his signature as well. "Excellent." Private McDonald sighed. "Where do you want it?"

"In the living room," John decided. He slipped on a pair of shoes and helped the private transport the boxes inside " Rebecca watched from the kitchen. The private wisely didn't comment.

"That should be it, sir. Oh, and this." He held out a small box. "Cortana cloned a new AI to enhance your reflexes. Not that you need it, sir, but she insisted."

"Thank you."

"It'll be an honor serving with you again, sir." Private McDonald snapped a crisp salute off and got back into his UNSC-issued van, pulling in a wide circle and heading back into the growing dusk. John closed the door and turned to the living room where several large boxes stood in various positions.

"Do you want me to go?" Rebecca asked, coming forward. She touched one of the boxes hesitantly.

John glanced at her. "It's your decision," he said after a pause. He'd like her to stay " he wanted to finish their dinner, but judging by the way Rebecca was peering at the boxes, that wasn't going to happen.

"Don't you need help getting into it?" Rebecca asked curiously as John started in on the first box.

The Spartan shrugged slightly, lifting out a heavy boot that clunked on the floor when he set it down. "It's faster with a team of techies but I can do it myself," he said quietly.

He assembled the pieces and set the boxes off to the side before standing back to look at the full MJOLNIR, laid out on his floor. It seemed empty, lying there " it usually stood on a rack, but it hadn't come with the suit. The paint was neatly applied, a shimmering green that, when his shields closed over it, would blend into a forest terrain. Next to the pieces lay the black one-suit he wore underneath it all.

"I should make sure it's functioning," John murmured, glancing at Rebecca. "You can stay if you want, but you may not want to."

"What?" Rebecca blinked, then remembered John's comments about how much clothing he wore in the suit and blushed. "Oh, right, sorry. I'll be in the kitchen."

John nodded and let her get out of sight " for her own sense of modesty " before peeling off his civilian clothing and carefully folding them on the arm of the couch nearby. The Spartan pulled on the skin-tight gel layer first, testing each joint and making sure it wasn't torn or punctured in any place. He pulled on the boots and leg armor, double-checking each seal and joint for damage and wear. Each

was brand new, however, and clearly someone had taken the time to polish each piece of equipment. Only the faint underlying odor of blood, sweat, and alien tissues that remained in the suit's gel layer let John know this truly was his armor. That, and the big "117" on his right chest plate. The technicians had removed or repaired all of the dents.

He finished suiting up, leaving the helmet off, and took a hesitant step. He moved much more quickly than he was used to â€" he fished the data chip from his pants pocket and slotted it into the receiver in his helmet before he forgot. When he carefully made his way into the kitchen, Rebecca squeaked upon seeing him.

"My Godâ€|" she murmured, looking the man up and down. "Now _that_ is the Spartan humanity knows," she said softly, almost sorrowfully. John nodded slightly and sealed his helmet, watching her through the mirrored golden visor. His HUD flickered to life and Cortana's "little sister" introduced herself.

"UNSC Artificial Intellience CTN 0587-9, Verdana, online. Running systems check. Calibrating neural interlace. Initiating shield test."

"Halt process," John said quickly. Discharging his shield inside could be dangerous. "Wait until command," he ordered.

"Halting all processes until further instructions," Verdana replied, sounding a little huffy. Definitely related to Cortana.

John turned on his external speakers and spoke to Rebecca. The process was automatic but he felt a slight distance between them that hadn't existed before. "I have to go outside to run the tests," he said.

"I'll come with you," Rebecca said, steadfastly ignoring the lack of facial cues from the now-armored man.

John nodded â€" a delicate operation in the MJOLNIR that he had long since mastered â€" and led the way to his back yard, where Chichi ran up and sniffed him over extensively. The Spartan walked to the center of the yard and Chichi sat by Rebecca's side on the porch, the human curling her fingers through the dog's hair to comfort herself.

"Reinitiate all system shakedowns," John ordered. "Initiate shield test. Bring health monitors online."

"Workingâ€|" Verdana whispered in his head. "All systems clean. Initiating shield test."

John felt a buzz build along his armor â€" then it flashed and the audible alarm rang through the helmet. "Audible to 50%," he ordered, gritting his teeth against the loud noise.

"Answering 50%," Verdana replied, turning the volume down. "Shield recharge reads as normal. Bringing health monitors online." They appeared, glowing, in the Spartan's HUD. "Bringing targeting system online. Initiating gel layer." The suit sucked up to John's body in a comforting way. "Starting tracking program."

John let the AI work, standing still to facilitate the process. "Please test reflex enhancements," Verdana asked courteously.

The Spartan dropped into a crouch, batted aside an invisible punch, rolled, stood, and mimed bringing a gun up to bear on a target. "Inhibit by 10%," he ordered. Verdana obliged and John tested the same moves again. "Disable inhibitor." He moved faster than he used to, but he was still uncomfortable. It had been too long, he realized â€" lifting weights was entirely different from dodging attacks or humping a hundred pounds of gear to an LZ.

"Testing communications uplink," Verdana murmured. "Contact established. Sending handshake. Confirmation received. System operational."

"Testing lights." The gloom of dusk surrounded them and was pierced as John's helmet lights lit up; he swept around, checking their range, and grunted in satisfaction. They light the area directly in front of him well, and cast light shadows on his peripheral vision.

"Scanning for glitches. None found. Suit is 100% operational, Master Chief."

"Thank you, Verdana." Verdana was clearly a "dumb" AI â€" Cortana didn't want a replacement, it seemed. "What are my orders?"

"Admiral Hood and a team of Naval personnel will arrive at 0700 local time tomorrow morning to transport you to UNSC Base Kilkary Desert. From there, you will board the hybrid ship Double Edged Blade, along with Alpha and Beta Hybrid Teams, and initiate a slip-space transition once out of Earth's magnetic and gravitational well. Final coordinates have not been released to me."

"Estimated time of return?"

"Three weeks. Upon arrival at the destination, you will command Alpha and Beta Hybrid Teams in order to secure a landing zone and protect UNSC personnel."

"Who is going?"

"Classified."

"Override code S-117."

"Request denied. Higher clearance necessary."

John frowned. Who was coming along that he couldn't know about? The Spartan unsealed his helmet and turned to Rebecca. "Everything checks out," he told her, looking down into her eyes.

"You look imposing," the woman said. "I'll leave you to it, then," Rebecca said softly, looking at Chichi. "Early morning tomorrow." She bit her lip and then gently touched the cold armor as though she could feel the warm arm beneath. "Be safe, John."

The Spartan smiled slightly. "I will," he promised. Rebecca nodded as John knelt to say goodbye to Chichi, who leapt up so she could lick his face, which made both humans smile slightly more sincerely.

"Goodbye, Chichi. Take care of Rebecca, got it?" Chichi woofed quietly, wagging her tail slightly. "Good girl." He ruffled her fur with a gloved hand and stood again, letting Rebecca back inside and then ushering her to the front door, watching to ensure she and Chichi were safely on their way home before he closed the door, locked it, and went to business.

First, he took off the armor and sprayed it with an anti-bacterial and smell-eating mist. After months of being in fresh air, being locked back in filtered air made the Spartan slightly nervous " and the suit _did_ smell a little. Memories of death and hard-fought battles were locked in that scent, and he didn't want to remember most of them. He left Verdana in the helmet and quickly redressed before going back into the kitchen and the dining room to clean up the forgotten dinner. Rebecca had left the cake in his fridge " he served himself a piece, figuring it'd be the last cake he'd have for nearly a month, and ate it as he waited for his body to tell him it was time to sleep.

15. The Spartan Returns

Mushiness.

****Chapter 14 " The Spartan Returns****

When Hood arrived, he did it in style. A small Pelican landed in John's driveway, announcing its approach to the pair in the house. John picked up his helmet and straightened, raised his hands, and sealed the joint with a pneumatic hiss. His HUD flashed to life.

"I'll be back soon," he murmured through the speakers.

Rebecca felt like she was looking into a mirror. It bent the images behind her, bathing her reflection in a golden glow. John's voice from the speakers was slightly distorted, deeper and more husky than she was used to. He moved carefully in his armor, probably still getting used to it.

She followed him out where Admiral Hood and an honor guard were standing at attention. They all saluted the Chief, who snapped to and returned it quickly, his armor moving smoothly with him.

"Welcome back, Master Chief," Admiral Hood said, glancing at Rebecca.

"Sir, Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy Spartan-117 reporting for duty as ordered, sir." John's voice through the helmet speakers was determined, as though he was going into battle.

"Let's lock and load, soldiers," Hood barked. The guards who had accompanied him filed back into the Pelican. John followed Hood in, turning and standing at the hatch as it slowly hissed closed, watching as they ascended and the hatch hissed shut.

Hood noticed the Spartan's stance and shook his head quietly. He hated himself for doing it, but it needed to be done. He might as well make the break clean " hopefully, John would recover on his own, and with the help of the woman who had stood at his side when he

had exited the house.

"Let's get to the point quickly, Sierra-117," Hood said, calling the Spartan over. He didn't like using John's designation now that the Spartan had a real name, but the military code demanded it â€" and it would hopefully make John a little more comfortable to be back under command. The Spartan turned around and grabbed a handhold on the Pelican's ceiling. "We're going to a neutral planet â€" it's designation is quite long, so we're calling it Treaty for now â€" for peace talks with the Brutes. The Arbiter and some of the Sangheili lords are going to accompany us, as will several UNSC and civilian leaders. You'll be head of security, and there as the Demon."

"Yes, sir. How many troops?"

"Minimal on the ground. We don't want to start a fight by appearing in force. At most, ten with you at the talks â€" there are two squads of fifteen each. Mixed human and Elite; they're calling themselves "Double Trouble," but their official names are Alpha and Beta Hybrid Teams. We aren't bringing the Grunts in on this one â€" they're content to throw their lot in with the Elites. We'll be taking a new ship, built mostly of Covenant technology but with a little human flair thrown in. It's deadly. We call her the _Double-Edged Blade_."

"Understood, sir."

Hood frowned slightly. He's forgotten how damn unapproachable John was in his armor â€" he had gotten used to seeing the other man's eyes, for one, and reading his expressions. However, the gold faceplate that stared back at him was impenetrable.

"We'll be docking with the _Blade_ in thirty minutes," Hood continued. "You'll meet your crew there. All of them are young. You'll have a week to hone them on the way out. We'll be at the talks for a week, probably. You'll be home within a moth."

Hood didn't know if he imagined the slightly straightening of John's shoulders; it was hard to tell in his thick armor. "I will serve as long as the UNSC needs me, sir."

Hood simply nodded, not knowing how to respond to that. "Your crew is comprised of soldiers who didn't fight in the Human-Covenant War. There's few of those left, for one, and we needed people who could work with Sangheili without problems. But the tradeoff is that they aren't tried in true battle. Well, the humans aren't. The Sangheili have all been in minor battles before, mostly between Sangheili and Sangheili. We didn't want old grudges messing this mission up."

"Is the _Blade_ equipped with a gymnasium and training court?"

"A small one. It's designed as a diplomatic vessel. But it's got enough shields and firepower to take down a small armada."

"I will ensure the guards are properly trained by the time we hit dirt, sir."

"Excellent. Also, Cortana will be joining us. She wonders if she can ride with you."

"Of course, sir." John's voice was slightly lighter, and Hood mentally sighed with relief. Cortana and the Spartan were old friends; if she couldn't keep him from reverting entirely back to his old ways, no one could.

"Perfect." Hood leaned back in his chair, dismissing the other man. The Pelican touched down an hour later at the UNSC base Verdana had told John about; the Spartan exited quickly, glad to be out in the fresh air again and opening his air filters wide.

"Atten-hut!" The soldiers at the base of the Pelican came to attention as the admiral joined the Spartan on the dirt. Both men returned the salute. "Sir, your transport ship is fueled and ready to fly," the leader told Admiral Hood. The admiral nodded and beckoned for the Spartan to follow him; the taller man did so readily.

They boarded the second ship â€" it looked like a strange melding of human Pelicans and Covenant dropships, something that set John on edge as he gripped the overhead handles. Admiral Hood strapped into a seat and a new file of troops boarded as well, clearly fresh from rotation and laughing amongst themselves. However, when one caught sight of the imposing green armor, clearly inhabited, they all shushed for the rest of the ride.

The Spartan widened his stance slightly as the ship left the atmosphere with little jarring and then slipped through vacuum towards the _Blade_. They docked quickly and neatly, a line of personnel lined up on deck waiting as everyone filed out. They greeted the Spartan with cheers; John ignored the cries of "Welcome back!" and "Good to see you again, Chief!" Hood had made it well-known within the military that Spartan-117 was coming on the mission.

Pelicans were being strapped down for transport â€" others were being unloaded. A couple of the transports had the sleek lines of Covenant about them, but their coloring matched everything else on the ship, a dull grey that reminded the Spartan he was back in ships, back to his life of military precision and coordination.

"Corporal!" A woman stepped forward and saluted the Admiral smartly. "Show the Master Chief to his quarters." John followed the Corporal as she saluted and turned away, through the ship. He admired it as they walked â€" it had the grey steel of a human ship, but the curving lines of a Covenant ship. Such corridors were the reason Covenant ships held up under brutal attacks â€" they spread the force out from a hit much better than straight lines.

The Corporal showed him to the officers' barracks and then to his room. Once John learned the entry combination, the woman led him on a quick tour of the ship. John memorized the layout â€" it was built in the style of a human ship, so he found his own way around after a couple of hours. He thanked the Corporal, who went off to do something or other, sensing that the Spartan wished to continue exploring on his own.

John rounded a corner and came face-to-face with an Elite, who glanced idly at him and then continued on his way, consulting a tablet in one clawed hand. The Spartan shook his head slightly; he didn't know what to make of _that_. He had worked with Thel before, and a few other Elites, but rarely, and they always treated him with

deference, and the humans with barely-concealed scorn. Furthermore, this Elite had looked smaller, less muscled â€" almost like a technician. John didn't know if Elites came in anything but warrior.

The Master Chief soon found his way to the bridge, where Admiral Hood was barking orders as the ship began to rumble up to speed, leaving Earth. He requested permission to enter the bridge, received it, and stood by the Admiral as the viewport cameras filled with empty space, leaving the green world they had just come from behind.

"We'll be taking a long road there," Admiral Hood told him. "So they can't back-track us to Earth. According to Thel, the Brutes don't know the location of our home world, so we plan to keep it that way."

John was silent. Cortana suddenly appeared in front of them, hands on her hips. "Well, good morning, everyone," she said cheerfully. "Admiral, I have control of the ship. And let me say, she is _beautiful_."

Hood chuckled. "You should complement the Sangheili engineers."

Well, that confirmed John's suspicions that Elites weren't just warriors. Cortana turned to him, reaching out a hand. He obediently held his hand out, and her hologram rested its tiny fingers on his. "Welcome back, Chief." Hood watched curiously; Cortana couldn't _feel_, precisely, but she was evolving at an enormous rate. Perhaps she was "feeling" John's glove to establish a connection.

"Cortana."

Cortana chuckled and withdrew her hand; John folded his behind his back. "How is Rebecca?"

John cleared his throat, clearly uncomfortable. This was the middle of the bridge, after all â€" not precisely the place to catch up with old friends. "She is well."

"Admiral, we have clearance to enter Slipspace," Cortana told Hood, shooting John a look that said, "We'll talk later."

"Let's take her on her maiden voyage, then, shall we?" Hood pulled out a ceremonial bottle of champagne â€" filled, John knew, with cloned champagne. Less and less food was now being farmed; with the loss of so many colonized worlds, and the use of Earth generally as an urban sanctuary, there were few enough farms that most food eaten by anyone was cloned. Rebecca, of course, grew most of her own vegetables, which were a _real_ treat for the Spartan after years of freeze-dried clone-food.

"All hands, prepare for SlipSpace departure in fiveâ€¦ fourâ€¦ threeâ€¦ twoâ€¦ oneâ€¦" The ship purred and slipped smoothly into Slipspace; John had to check the screens to make sure they really were in. He had never felt such a smooth transition. It must have been the work of the Sangheili. "Congratulations. _The Double-Edged Blade_ has made first Slipspace transition. We will be dropping out of Slipspace in precisely twenty six hours, real time, and

re-entering soon thereafter." Cortana's voice echoed through the ship, and John thought he could faintly hear a few sighs of relief from the crew at their stations on the bridge.

"Sir, permission to begin the training," John requested, turning to the Admiral with a smart salute.

"Permission granted," the Admiral told him, returning the salute. "Take Cortana with you. We have another AI on board to handle the general functions of the ship."

"And it's a little crowded with both of us," Cortana said, glancing across the room to where a second pedestal was set up. A glowing green figure â€" this AI had the shape of a tree with a face, surrounded by holographic birds and squirrels â€" appeared on the pedestal.

"I'm New Start," the new AI said in a voice that burbled like a newly-fed brook. John nodded slightly. "It is my pleasure to serve."

"Suck-up," Cortana muttered, reaching for the Chief. John held his hand close enough for Cortana's hologram to grab and then she disappeared. He felt a cool sensation in his skull as she settled in. Cortana had improved her own ability to transfer such that she could literally move through air, transferring her entire being into his suit without the chip currently back in the holographic pedestal.

"I heard that," New Start said, sniffing in haughty disregard for Cortana.

"AIs are getting snootier and snootier with every generation," Cortana sighed for John's ears alone. He saluted the Admiral, turned smartly, and made his way towards the mess hall, where he suspected he'd find most of his forces.

"It's good to see you again," Cortana continued. "And how is Rebecca?"

"Good," John said shortly.

"Aren't you happy?"

"Of course I am."

"You're going back into military mode," Cortana scolded. "You're more effective when you've got a little more humanity in you."

John ignored her and stepped into the mess hall. The few dozen soldiers there â€" mixed human and Elite â€" slowly noticed and hushed, turning to the green-armored Spartan standing in the doorway.

John waited for full silence and then turned on his helmet speakers. "I expect all members of the Double Trouble teams to join me in the gym within five minutes." He waited for a reaction; the Elites stood immediately, their mandibles closing in a sign of respect as they jogged past him into the corridor towards the gym. The humans were a little slower on the up-take and skirted around him carefully.

"Rumors about you have grown in your absence," Cortana told him as John followed the last human out of the mess hall. "You're supposedly ten feet tall and crush Brutes with a single swing of your sword."

"If I wielded a sword, I would," John told her.

"Just remember, you aren't invincible."

"I never thought I was."

Cortana snorted, obviously not believing him. He had put them in the direct path of danger too many times for her to think he didn't believe in his astonishing good luck.

"Well, shall we?" John asked as he entered the gym. It was a modest room, hardly large enough to hold the thirty soldiers who now stood at attention. He noticed, with grim satisfaction, that the Elites and humans were well integrated; they didn't separate.

He walked down the line, memorizing names and ranks as they appeared in his HUD. The Elites were young â€" he could tell by the slight fidgeting, the smaller and lighter armor. The humans were well-trained but young as well.

"Not nearly so bad as I thought it would be," John murmured to Cortana. "They're young, but they're hard â€" probably children of vets."

Cortana accessed every file through the wireless link she maintained to the ship. "The humans are. The Elites, not so much. Just out of training, Thel said."

"Where is he?"

"Thel?" Cortana seemed surprised. "I think he's in his room. Probably drafting more speeches."

"Make a note for me to talk to him when I'm done here."

"I'm not your PDA," Cortana told him icily. Still, she made a big note in the middle of his HUD with "Talk to Thel" written on it in neat print. He minimized it and turned his attention to the recruits, who had been oblivious of the exchange between man and AI.

John focused on one of the Elites, whose name in his HUD appeared as Bero. The Elite stood just taller than John, but that didn't faze him. The Elites towered over their human comrades, however. He turned to another Elite, this one named Toho.

"Split up into your squads," John ordered, stepping back. The mass moved fluidly; the squads were evenly split between humans and Elite. "I am Master Chief Spartan-117. It is my duty to ready you for facing the Brutes. You have been chosen because you have not spent thirty years fighting and killing each other. You are young, and you have less than one week to be ready to face something larger, deadlier, and meaner than all of you combined. Hopefully, we'll just be pretty ornaments. But if we're not, we need to be prepared to guard the Admiral, the Arbiter, and all of the leaders on our side."

"There are some obvious disadvantages we're facing here. First, you Elites are going to have to be careful not to step on the humans." The Elites said nothing. "Humans, remember that Elites _aren't_ the enemy anymore."

John walked between the groups; they followed after a moment as he silently led them into the highest gravity area of the ship " just next to the rotating gravity generator. This part of the ship was clearly human in design. "You will be training in this section of the gym," he told them. "I need to know just how much I have to do. Find a partner of a different race and start sparring."

Everyone shuffled " the humans were obviously feeling the gravity, but the Elites were used to it, Sanghelios having nearly twice the gravity of Earth " into pairs and started sparring. John wandered through the troops and corrected one Elite's punch, another human's block.

John sighed in his helmet, watching the Elites slow themselves down to not hurt their partners. The humans were trying gamely to keep up, but it was obvious that they simply weren't fast or strong enough.

"Halt," John ordered. There were a few gasps of relief as humans bent over, worn out. The Elites looked slightly worked in comparison. "Humans, to the weights." The humans in the group groaned but trudged obediently into the weights area. John motioned for the Elites to join him further out into the gym, so they didn't trip over something.

"I hate to break up that _sad_ display, but you are too good to be slowing yourselves down. Brutes are meaner and tougher than humans. Not to mention bigger than any of us." One Elite clacked his mandibles. "Who is the best at sparring here?"

One Elite stepped forward; he stood nearly five inches taller than John. His tag in John's HUD flashed his name " Private Ebon, which meant "quick" in the Sangheili language. He bent his head in a gesture of respect. "I am, Master Chief," he said, his mandibles contorting to make the "ch" sound.

"If Demon suits you better, call me that," John told him. The Elite smiled slightly, obviously relieved " he probably didn't enjoy spitting when trying to talk to his superior officer. "Let's dance, you and I."

The Elites around them backed up warily as the pair settled into defensive crouches. John focused on the Elite, his entire world consumed. He could feel his heart begin to beat faster. Private Ebon was a newly-armored warrior, eager to prove his worth " which gave John an advantage.

Ebon darted forward, intent on a chest-strike. John moved out of the way, smacking the Elite upside the head in an insulting way, making it clear that he was not impressed. Ebon turned swiftly and jumped; he came down trying to land on John, who caught him and tossed him towards his peers with a grunt. They quickly moved out of the way as Ebon turned in mid-air like a cat, landing on his legs and one hand, the other outstretched for balance.

"Pretend I'm a Brute, and I'm threatening the Arbiter," John suggested. Ebon warbled a war-cry as he rushed forward again, swinging one arm into John's midsection, the other aiming a punch at his head. John blocked both hits, testing the strength behind them.

John tripped the Elite, who was clearly not ready for such a "dishonorable" move, and followed him to the floor, sitting on his chest. Ebon struggled to free himself, trying first to kick the Spartan and then rolling, trying to throw John off-balance just long enough to get free.

John said calmly, "When they have you pinned, they start eating. They'll go for your throat, first, if you're lucky. They seem to like chewing on heads, too." John pressed his forearm into the Elite's throat, choking him. Ebon's mandibles clacked as he fought to breathe. "Stay on your feet. You're lunch otherwise." John released Ebon and stood; the Elite slowly stood as well, head bowed in shame.

Sangheili pride was prickly, John knew â€" he eyed the defeated Elite. "This is not Sanghelios," he said loudly enough for everyone to hear. "You will be beaten. I will beat you, and I'll probably bring in some other Elites to beat you. You need to learn how to lose. We humans have adjusted to it. But you haven't. Until you lose, you can _never_ win."

Ebon raised his head slightly, his mandibles slightly slack. "We will also not be bringing weapons into the talks. That will incite the Brutes to attack. So you will all need to re-learn how to kill. Spar amongst yourselves, and forget your code of honor. The Brutes don't have one, and you cannot fight them as you would a rival Sangheili."

The Elites paired off obediently, striking swiftly. John checked on the humans, who were working on their strength. He only had a few days to bring them up to speed, and he worried about it. _If only they were all Spartans,_ John sighed to himself.

He ran everyone through various drills, pitting Elite and human against each other â€" the Elites made good Brute stand-ins when facing humans, and John himself played the Brute when a mixed force of Elites and humans attacked him. It wasn't ideal, however; John was only one Spartan, after all, and if blood was shed during the talks, it would be by five or six Brutes at once.

By the time the Elites were worn out, and the humans nearly dead on their feet, John felt his internal clock tell him it was tie for sleep. He dismissed the troops, telling them to eat, shower, and bunk together to build unit cohesion. Then he went to find Thel.

Upon hearing about his plan, Thel agreed eagerly to round up several of his best warriors â€" mostly older veterans along as representatives of their states on Sanghelios. After allowing the Double Trouble troops nearly eight hours of sleep, John tossed each and every Elite and human out of their bed with the help of five gold- or red-armored Elites.

They came to blearily, shouting in confusion as John and the Elites

who had agreed to help him stood in the doorway. The Elites quickly lined up, standing at attention " the humans took the hint slowly.

"Into the gym," John ordered. The soldiers double-timed it out of the room, and John followed, his new trainers eager to be started and right on his heels.

Once the two squads were split up again, John further divided them into three teams of ten each, paired with the skills he had seen displayed yesterday and by their records.

"We are expecting no less than four Brutes to be present at the talks," John said. "And there will be ten of you, with me, on the ground as security. We are the Brutes." John indicated himself, the Arbiter, and the four veteran Elites with a wave of his armored hand. "Let us begin."

John pitted ten humans and Elites against four, five, or six "Brutes" at a time. The Brutes generally won, though there were a few "casualties" among them. Thel offered advice to one Elite who was attacking him, and eventually "died" with a revised jab to the neck.

The three groups rotated, attacking without weapons. During one attack, with six "Brutes" against the ten mixed-race warriors, John found himself facing three attackers " an Elite and two humans " who stole his concentration. He suddenly felt something slam into his back and fell onto his chest plate, already making his move to throw the weight off; however, Elite fingers entered his camera's view and then yanked his helmet off.

The battlefield went silent as the Elite holding John's helmet raised it with a triumphant warble. John heaved and threw him off, standing. The Elite handed him his helmet; John tucked it under one arm, enjoying being out of it for a moment. "Excellent teamwork," he said, shaking his head and smoothing his hair back. He was aware that the humans were staring at him, as were the Elites. He frowned slightly. "Yes, I'm human, and no, this does not excuse you from stopping in the middle of a battle. If I lose my helmet during a real fight, I hope you won't all stare like I've suddenly turned naked."

Embarrassed, the Elites and humans attacked the veterans again, as John moved out of the fray, officially "dead." The battle ended quickly, and John ordered everyone to halt. Two more "Brutes" had been "killed" " the Arbiter and two veterans were left, triumphant, on the battlefield.

"The sort of teamwork that unmasked me will work well against a Brute. But don't try to pull its head off," he told the Elite " Teho. "You aren't nearly strong enough. Break their neck, or smash their skull in if you have a rock handy. Dismissed." The troops saluted " the humans with hands to foreheads, the Elite with fists over their first heart " and moved slowly out of the gym. John resealed his helmet and thanked Thel and the veterans for their help.

Thus the days in Slipspace passed quickly. Double Trouble improved remarkably, for non-augmented humans and young Elites. John didn't

remove his helmet again and remained in his suit unless he was showering. It was both comforting and confining; he realized he missed being able to speak to someone without them trying to make eye-contact through a mirrored visor.

They arrived at the planet designated as neutral just before the Brutes. John led his troops in one last drill and then ordered them to prepare themselves to escort the leaders to the planet. All thirty would go down, but twenty would remain at the camp during the talks, guarding it and resting for their turn. The treating was supposed to go on for seven Earth days, with breaks only for sleeping and eating.

John barked, "Officer on deck!" as Admiral Hood came into the hangar bay, leading the representatives. Five Pelicans were fueled and ready to transport the humans and Sangheili; the supplies had been dropped already, under John's careful eye. The thirty members of Double Trouble snapped to attention.

"At ease," Admiral Hood ordered. John widened his stance slightly and clasped his hands behind his back. "Let's load up, everyone. The Jiralhanae are in route."

John snapped off orders, though everyone knew where to go ahead of time. Three humans and three Elites piled into each Pelican. John boarded the one that carried the Admiral to the surface. For safety reasons, each Pelican carried, at most, two leaders. The pilot closed the hatch and they quickly dropped out of the belly of the ship.

When they landed, John and his troops secured the area before allowing the leaders to emerge. The camp was quickly set up, with large tents for the treaty personnel and smaller ones, along the perimeter, for the soldiers. The humans and Elites paired up, two per tent, as John had had them doing since he joined them on the Blade.

John himself had a tent at the outskirts of the camp, between the main body and the valley designated for the treaty talks. Overhead, the Blade moved slowly in a geosynchronous orbit. John set up patrols and then they sat back to wait for the Brutes to arrive.

It didn't take long. Within two Earth hours, Cortana announced that New Start had detected a Slipspace rupture just three million kilometers distant. A sleek Covenant ship burst through it and glided smoothly to an orbit following the Blade's; John watched through his magnified HUD as several Covenant drop-ships flew out of the ship's port and dove into the atmosphere.

"Incoming," he barked over the radio. Around the camp, the Elites and humans gathered their weapons and circled around the larger tents, wary in case of attack. However, the drop ships touched down and belched forth several Brutes without passing over them. The ships returned to the larger ship in orbit, as per the agreement.

"New Start has a lock on their ship in case things go badly," Cortana told John as the Spartan watched the Brutes set up something like a camp. They built a roaring fire and sat around it " he watched from a distance. He could see the biggest one, treated with respect and caution by the others.

By its dark gold armor, it was a War Chieftain. John had faced a few before " they were deadly in combat, armed or not. The rest of the brutes were Chieftains, just under the War Chieftain, marked by their black and red armor.

"You look like a Minor to them." John glanced at Thel, who had come up behind him. "Only the minors wear green. Sangheili in training wear green. Have you considered getting your armor upgraded?"

John smirked behind his visor. "It was green when I got it, and once the fighting starts, I turn tie-die."

"Tie-die?" Thel blinked, his mandibles struggling to form the unfamiliar word.

"Stripped with many colors."

"Ah, yes, from the blood" Thel looked across the valley at the fire. "Yet among both our races, armor is an important symbol of status. Even a little gold highlighting would make it obvious that you are highly ranked."

John shook his head. "I'd rather not paint a bullseye on my chest."

"Merely stripes," Thel clarified, missing the metaphor.

"I meant that I don't want to become a target. When I was fighting your kind, I always went for the higher-ups first; it made the Grunts scatter."

"Ah, I see. Yet you have already "painted a bullseye on your chest" as you say. You are the Demon."

"And I'd rather the Brutes focus on that rather than the fact that I'm a human in a fancy set of armor."

"You are much more than that," Thel told him sternly. "What has you contemplating your life so much, my friend?"

John shook his head slightly. "Civilian life is" Very different."

"I heard that you have adjusted well to the situation." There was humor in Thel's voice, as though he didn't quite believe it.

"Yes, I am."

Thel was silent for a moment. "Among our people, the highest warriors do not marry " though they mate with any female they desire to continue their powerful genes. Is this not so in your culture?"

John glanced at Thel. "Admiral Hood is married, you know."

"He is not the type of warrior that would make that status among our people. He is a brilliant tactician and an awe-inspiring leader, but he is not the sort of Sangheili that becomes what you would call aristocrats. You are. You have the nobility of an aristocrat."

John chuckled slightly. "Thanks, I think. Among humans, it's considered slightlyâ€| irregularâ€| to settle down with a partner without marrying them."

"You place so much emphasis upon it. Is it an important ritual?"

"You could say that." John unsealed his helmet, shaking his hair in the light breeze. "It can be as simple or elaborate as one likes."

"I will never be used to seeing your human face," Thel told him, glancing at him. John smiled slightly.

"I've gotten too used to fresh air on my face," he admitted. "Besides, it's good to remind people that there's a human under all this. My sideâ€| Lost sight of that."

Thel nodded. "To us, you were the Demon, a fearsome creature of some unknown origin. There were whispers â€" after you ignited the first Holy Ring â€" that you were sent by the Forerunners to test our faith."

"Cortana seems to think the Forerunners were some sort of ancestors to humanity, and that's why the Oracles called us the Reclaimers."

"When that became known, it was heresy â€" for humans to be tied so closely to our gods? Blasphemy." Thel clicked his mandibles in amusement. "The Prophets, as you call them, declared that you were not human and, in fact, some ancient enemy of the Forerunners, here to test our faith and stray our feet from the glorious path."

John nodded slightly. "I like that. I've never been a man of religion."

"It guides your feet and gives you purpose in life."

John glanced at Thel. "I had a purpose. I kept men and women alive. I killed Covenant and Flood, and I went where I was needed. Now, I have another purpose."

"You will breed a new generation of Spartans?"

Thel was completely ignorant of the slight rudeness of his question, but John didn't mind. He was a blunt man as well, though perhaps not so much compared to the Arbiter. "Probably not. I may help train them, though. There's someâ€| Differenceâ€| Between my genes and a regular human's genes."

"Can human females reproduce so quickly?"

John chuckled slightly. "Noâ€| Nor would I want to breed a whole new generation. There are new Spartans â€" adults, well able to make a choice in their training and augmentations. It may be that it is a moot point, though, if our genetics are incompatible."

"I hope for your sake they are compatible," Thel murmured, looking up at the stars above them. "Children, human or Sangheili, I suspect, are the most amazing thing that can happen to a male."

"Admiral Hood should have a new baby," John realized, thinking about the Admiral suddenly. "Terry was just showing seven months ago."

Thel nodded. "I have met the new human child. It is small and weak and very pink. It cries when it is not feeding, and it stinks terribly."

John chuckled. "We're not that pretty as babies."

"From the way Terry was going on about him, you would think he was the most beautiful creature in the world."

"To a mother, their child is perfect. You don't insult a mother about her kid. They'll hurt you."

"So I was warned." Thel's voice was dry. John nodded slightly. "My wife nearly took my head off when I commented that our son had short legs at birth."

John winced. "And you've learned your lesson, I hope."

"Yes." Thel nodded gracefully. "Each of our children is beautiful, perfect, and not short-legged." John chuckled.

"Females. We males will always suffer ignorance when it comes to them."

"Thanks be to the Forerunners," Thel muttered. "I could not suffer the thoughts of my wife."

"You should be nicer about her," John scolded. "She is your wife."

"I meant it in the most awed way possible," Thel said smoothly. "She is able to run my entire estate without so much as a single duel, and is able-bodied and strong-minded enough to hold her own during the annual treaties."

John tilted his head. "The annual treaties?" he asked curiously. Thel nodded.

"It is, you would think, barbaric of us. However, once every Sanghelios year, each state sends a representative to battle physically and mentally. Borders are changed, treaties formed, and blood shed during the rituals. While I was at war with most of the males of my state, my wife stood as my champion and won us many pieces of land."

"Is that common?"

"Of course. Male Sangheili attend to the glory of the Forerunners. It is a female's job to tend to the state and holdings, ensure the harvest is drawn in and replanted, and keep the whole country running smoothly, as you would say."

"What about the children?"

"They are under the guidance of aâ€¦| You do not have a word for it."

It is a replacement, for the mother. This female ranks lowly or is deformed in some manner. She cares for the children of the state until they are old enough to join the training when they begin running. Some emerge earlier as warriors, and they become the best of us. Others develop late and sometimes deformed. They are sent to the farms, mines, and other necessary but lowly jobs that are essential in every civilization."

"No offense, Thel, but that sounds barbaric."

"I have seen the way you treat women. Is it not the same?"

"Women can move in society just as easily as men," John protested.

"You believe that because you are a man, and a Spartan at that. The females you know are elite warriors, above the normal rank of men and soldiers. Would you allow Rebecca to join the UNSC?"

"Of course not," John snapped. "But she doesn't want to, either."

"There, you see? Should my wife wish to join our ranks as a warrior, she would be allowed â€" though she would not leave the planet. She had chosen to be planet-bound in her duties and way of life. She chose so willingly. Can you say the same for your women?"

John glanced at the stars. "Alright, there are fewer women in the military. That's just because a lot of them aren't up to the physical requirements. Many men aren't, either. It's not that we're discriminating against them. We're above that."

"Every society discriminates upon differences," Thel said thoughtfully, folding his knees awkwardly â€" at least to John, though Thel sat down gracefully. John joined him on the ground, legs over the side of the sheer cliff in front of them. "If there were no females, there would be no males â€" and no imagined superiority of males over females. It is strange, in my mind â€" in all advanced cultures I have met, the males are more powerful than the females. Yet, on our world at least, for the animals that we have bred and used for millennia to plow our fields, ride into battle, and even kept as pets, the opposite is true. The female is larger, to better carry the children and defend them against predators."

"That is strange, isn't it?" John asked, thinking about the animals he knew. "I've helped Rebecca tend to her horses for a while. There isn't much difference in size based on general, but we've bred them for thousands of years. It's possible their ancestors were like that. With any domestic animal, it's the same."

"What is a horse?"

"A four-legged, furred herbivore. It has thick hooves, almost like yours but single-toed. They have long faces with their mouth at the end and their eyes on either side of their head way far above it. They have a hairy mane along their neck â€" which looks like a long Sangheili neck, really â€" and long hairy tail."

"They are for eating?"

"Well, in some places, but Rebecca breeds them as work horses. To plow fields for those old-fashioned people, or to ride."

"Into battle?"

John shook his head. "No, they're rather useless in space. They're just for riding around. If you want to go a ways without a track for a car, you take a horse or your own two feet."

"I see. They sound rather useless."

"They're wonderful creatures," John assured him. "They're intelligent, strong, beautiful, and can read emotions like a dog."

"Like Chichi?"

John nodded. "There are lots of kinds of dogs, though. Chichi's one of the biggest breeds."

"I see. Your world is much more diverse than mine. We have a few dozen species of small creatures â€" you would name them insects, probably. A couple hundred animal types, all told. I am told that you have more diversity among just one family of animal."

John nodded. "There are thousands of creatures on Earth. Most are clones â€" our ancestors killed off most natural populations."

Thel shook his head. "Humanity is concerned with a very small picture of time," he said gruffly. "They do not look to the future nearly so much as they should."

John silently agreed, staring at the stars. "Until we met the Covenant, we were convinced we were the only sentient creatures in the universe."

"That is short-sighted of your kind."

John chuckled. "And foolish. When the Covenant attacked, it took a moment for the fact that _aliens_ existed to sink in."

Thel nodded slightly. "And to us, it was abhorrent and blasphemous that you desecrated sacred planets with your filthy footsteps."

"Thanks," John said dryly.

"I meant no disrespect," Thel said quickly.

"I'm not offended. You're probably right. Even before you came along, humanity was at war. The Outer Colonies were rebelling against the UNSC and Earth and the Inner Colonies. That was why I and my Spartans were originally created â€" to destroy the Insurrectionists."

"You were not created to battle the Covenant?" Thel seemed surprised.

John shook his head. "If they had started our training just when the Covenant attacked, I wouldn't have been in the program. It would have been years before Spartans hit dirt for their first battle."

"Then the Insurrectionists were a blessing," Thel said thoughtfully. "Had you not been created, the Covenant would have destroyed planets more quickly."

John nodded. "It would have been a shorter war."

"Do youâ€¦ Miss them? Your fellow Demons?"

John glanced at him and then back at the stars. "Most of them are dead. Some we don't know about. But they're probably dead. It's been over a year since they went missing, and in the dead vacuum of space. I miss them. I honor them, and their sacrifice, but I miss them, too. It's lonelyâ€¦ Being the last of a dying breed, as it were."

"There are the new Spartans," Thel pointed out.

"With more augmentations, upgraded armor, and younger, volunteers from the military branches. No, Thel. They're not my Spartans. I feel the same kinship towards them as I do towards any human. It's not much."

"To belong nowhere is the curse of our kind, my friend." John glanced at Thel curiously. "The Arbiter is a position taken up only in the darkest of times. I remain the Arbiter simply because my name is not official. With my branding of shame, they tore my name away as well. Though I have regained its use, I have not earned the right to bear it again."

"You're a magnet for change," John commented softly. "You saw the truth of the Rings. You convinced the Sangheili â€" and now the Unggoy â€" to leave the Covenant. And you're about to talk the Brutes out of a rather nasty war, if everything goes well."

"Nothing can keep the Jiralhanae from fighting," Thel commented darkly. "These talks are merely lengthening the process. They will treat until their armada is strong. And then they will come in force. They do not know the location of Earth, but they do know how to find Sanghelios."

"Should they find your planet, humanity will come to your defense," John reminded him.

Thel clacked his mandibles. "I mean no disrespect, but to be honest, humans are no match for Brutes. Current company excepted, of course."

"Thanks," John said dryly, grinning. Thel glanced at him and returned the grin. "Besides, with your Covenant technology, our ships will plow their ships from space like bugs on a windshield."

"Indeed, let us hope so."

"You boys look like you're having fun," Admiral Hood commented behind them. Thel and John glanced over their shoulders. "John, nice to see you again."

John smirked slightly, knowing exactly what Hood meant. "I've gotten too used to non-recycled air," he admitted.

"Do you require my assistance, Admiral?" Thel asked politely. Hood shook his head and sat next to John, though slightly farther back from the edge. A Spartan might survive the fall, but a regular human wouldn't.

"We'll be going in at first light," Hood told them quietly. "John, are your troops ready?"

"Yes, sir," John said firmly. "You are in good hands."

"We knew you could do it."

"And, may I say, sir, congratulations on your son." John smiled slightly; Hood blinked and then grinned widely, clearly proud.

"I see gossip is a thing the Sangheili are used to," Hood chuckled, glancing at Thel. "Thank you, John. You should stop by when we get back. After you see Rebecca, of course." He smirked slyly. John shook his head.

"You're as bad as Thel," he scolded the man. Then John blinked, as did Thel and Hood. He had sounded like he was talking to a civilian. "My apologies, sir," he said quickly.

"No need, John." Hood laughed. "It's good to hear you loosening up a little. Have you considered what you want to do with yourself when we return?"

"Why is my civilian life so interesting to people?" John asked the stars. "First Cortana, now you twoâ€¦"

"Well, we're glad for you, for one. You need a woman's touch."

"Not to mention we're your friends," Cortana's voice said from his helmet, which John had set on the ground next to him. "And we can tease you without worrying about you hitting us."

"It kinds gives me hope," Hood admitted. "You know, that the war didn't ruin humanity's chance at a future. If you can find someone to love and be happy, anyone can." John shook his head. "Besides, it's good for the soldiers to see you â€" they are still having trouble understanding how so many "invincible" Spartans ended up on the KIA list all of a sudden."

The man shook his head slightly. "Has there been any word of the missing ones?" he asked.

Lord Hood shook his head. "None. We are still sending probes. You'd be the first to know, when we hear from them."

John nodded, gazing at the Brute camp across the canyon. "If I had a dozen Spartans, I wouldn't be so worried about this meeting."

"You have thirty of the best troopers we can provide," Admiral Hood responded after a moment.

"Yes, sir. I don't mean to belittle them, but they are humans and young Elites. We will have to step carefully with the Brutes tomorrow."

"We always are," Thel assured him. "But the Jiralhanae are very touchy when it comes to honor. They won't allow you to make a single mistake, so we will all be "on our toes," as you say."

"If anything happens, we'll be there to protect you," the Spartan asserted.

"I need no such protection," the Arbiter said quickly.

"I'm glad for it," Lord Hood admitted.

John glanced at the admiral and smiled slightly. Lord Hood was a good man, and as Thel had said, a brilliant tactician and strategist. Humanity was lucky to have such a commander. It made the Spartan think about Captain Keyes, CPO Mendez, all of his fellow Spartans â€" men and women with whom he had served. People he had bled for, fought for, protected, now mostly dead; people who had earned his respect in one way or another, mostly in battle.

16. Birthday Party and Ship-Side News

This is mostly filler, but also a chance for people to get to know Rebecca a little more, and to explore the culture of the 2500s as I see it evolving. Also, please note â€" temperatures are in Celsius, but that's "understood" in the future so it isn't listed. Just so you don't get confused. Thanks for reading, and please leave a review!

Chapter 15 â€" Birthday Party and Ship-Side News

Rebecca slammed the door, growling faintly. Chichi bound towards her to greet her owner but stopped mid-leap, sensing the woman's anger and frustration. Instead of her usual boisterous greeting, therefore, the dog carefully nosed her mistress's pants, rubbing her large head against the woman's thigh.

"Good girl, Chichi. I'm alright," Rebecca sighed, rubbing a hand over her face and scrunching the other in the dense, soft fur of her dog's ears. "Come on, time for some food for both of us."

The reporters were growing bolder each day; thankfully, her phone number was listed on the Citizen Protection of Privacy list, which meant they couldn't badger her with calls 24/7. However, that didn't stop them from standing on her lawn at all hours, yelling questions whenever she appeared and otherwise using telephoto lens to try and see what she was doing.

It was as though they thought she was hiding something. Somehow, Rebecca was fairly famous in her own way. Though she appreciated the awareness this constant coverage was raising about natural farming and non-clone reproduction techniques, she hated being at the center of attention.

Making sure the drapes were firmly closed, Rebecca quickly placed a bowl of hearty dog food down for Chichi while she warmed a kettle of water, holding her hands to the head momentarily. The chill in the air had not quite released its hold; warm spring days were still at least a week away. For breakfast, Rebecca decided to make herself tea and oatmeal. She quickly gathered the necessary ingredients and

chopped up a few pieces of ripe apple to fold into the oatmeal.

Outside, the camera men jostled for a good position to see the front door, their high-quality cameras balanced on shoulders or in holding straps on their chests. Each reporter gossiped with their neighbors, keeping one eye on the house for any changes, hands cupping take-out cups of warm tea, coffee, or energy drinks. It was a dull duty for all involved, and many of them lost their voices trying to get a comment from the woman about her neighbor.

One big rumor that every reporter was dying to substantiate â€" was Rebecca Shields romantically interested in the Spartan who so recently moved in next door? Most had been offered bonuses if they could get her to lay the rumor to rest, one way or another; either confirm or deny it, though any denial would be met with hearty further denial from the public.

One man stood slightly apart from the gaggle of reporters, sipping his coffee silently and watching the house through half-lidded eyes. Frank mused quietly to himself, avoiding with disdain the petty squabbles between cameramen and reporters as the hours ticked by, much as they did any other day, with little sign of the house's inhabitant.

Around lunch time, his coffee gone cold from inattention and his nose numb, Frank shook himself slightly from his stupor and rolled his head from side to side, cracking it audibly. His knees were slightly locked into position from having stood there for the past four and a half hours, so he gingerly shook them out as well before moving over to his partner.

"Any sign of movement?" he asked quietly.

"Hey, Frank. None at all. Another boring day stalking this house like a pair of wolves." Julie smirked slightly, a stray strand of grey hair escaping her beanie as she readjusted her camera. It was, of course, rolling â€" though it shows little but snow, a lit house, and the barn. The same view had burned its way into Frank's memories for the past week.

"Keep up the good work."

Julie huffed and freed a hand from her camera to scratch her nose, probably hoping to put more feeling into it. "This used to be exciting," she complained. "Now? It's just standing around until my ass freezes off." Her ample rump shook slightly as she shivered.

"Remember, we cracked the Spartan a little. She's nothing compared to him," Frank reassured her.

"You got _maybe_ five minutes of stuff from him," Julie huffed, snorting.

"More than anyone else got."

"And you had to be treated for frostbite on your pecker."

"That's a lie and you know it."

"Yeah, but it makes a great story. God. I want something hot. Is that coffee?"

"Cold as your heart, but yes."

"Don't care. Give it here." Frank obediently handed over the cold drink; Julie quaffed it immediately, grimacing. "No cream?"

"I like it black."

"Hmpf." Julie snorted and handed back the mug, readjusting the camera's burden on her shoulders. "When do we get some grub? I'm starving."

"Soon, maybe. I'll bring you something. You're in a good spot."

Julie rolled her green eyes. "Uh huh. If she ever comes out via the front door."

Wordlessly, Frank patted her unburdened shoulder and trooped towards their van, where the built-in coffee machine â€" practically a necessity for any reporter sent out of the studio â€" was kept running day and night. The pair that would replace him and Julie, come dawn, were now sleeping fitfully in the small bunks at the front of the van, where the driver and passenger would normally sit.

"Any news?" Feria muttered, rolling over in her bunk and blinking blearily at the blast of cold air that invaded before Frank could pull the van door shut.

"None worth noting," Frank responded quietly, refilling his thermos from the coffee pot.

"Colder 'n a witch's tits out there," the younger woman groaned, huddling under her blanket. "Turn up the heat, would you?"

"Sure thing." Frank quickly upped the temperature a couple of degrees, hearing the heater kick on with a low rumble. "Go back to sleep. You'll have a long, dreary night of it."

Feria grumbled agreement and rolled over again, unconsciously curling up into a partial fetal position to better warm herself. Frank quickly hopped out of the van and back into the chilly air, his breath blowing steamy clouds around him. The cold snap that had rolled through on the cusp of a warm spring-like day had taken everyone â€" except, apparently, the locals â€" by surprise. Frank rejoined the group of reporters, standing close to the gaggle to better overhead murmured conversations.

Inside, Rebecca quickly put the finishing touches on the cake, neatly penning the exclamation point and doing a few icing whorls to make it look more elegant. The chocolate frosting was colored a deep, rich blue â€" the inside of the cake was vanilla. Three icing roses sat in a cluster at the point she had designated as the top of the cake; underneath them, "Happy Birthday Luke!" was written in neat icing.

The woman smiled as she observed her handiwork. Just one of her many

talents, baking cakes â€" and she took pride in that. As a finishing touch, she stuck a few sugar candies around the top, centered on whorls and around the rim. She would put in the candles when she got to his house; she packed them carefully into the carrying box for the cake. Chichi lifted her head from her post in front of the fire but decided to stay put as the woman bustled about, cleaning up the kitchen.

She ran upstairs to get showered and changed quickly, making sure no icing or flour was left in her hair as she washed it thoroughly. Then, naked â€" and double-checking that the drapes on the window to her bedroom were firmly tied shut â€" she peered at her wardrobe choices that she had laid out the night before.

After two minutes of contemplating â€" and mostly thinking about nothing, just daydreaming â€" Rebecca chose a loose green top over a fitted white tank top and brown slacks. For good measure, she added a pair of earrings â€" green emeralds framed with silver â€" and a silver necklace. Thus dressed her best, she hurried back downstairs and slipped into a pair of heavy boots, jacket, and gloves. She tucked the last few inches of her nice pants into the boots so they wouldn't be splashed or get wet on the way over to Luke's house.

Gathering up the cake and giving Chichi a goodbye pat, Rebecca paused in front of the door to prepare herself for the dash to her truck. She had parked on the lawn, which would kill the grass come spring, but it was a small price to pay so that she didn't have to wade through the dozen or so reporters and cameras toeing her private property line.

I really must put up a warning sign, she thought to herself once more. She had one in the garage â€" but hadn't had time to put it up yet, or had forgotten._ Well, I'm remembering now,_ Rebecca thought with a sigh. She yanked the door open and closed it quickly to keep the house from bleeding heat too much, and then shielded her eyes from the glare of the sun bouncing off the snow and found her truck, sitting between her and the reporters.

They, of course, perked up immediately and the barrage commenced. She ignored the yelled questions and hurried to her truck, using the plowed path to keep her boots from being soaked by the dense snow. Once shielded from the cameras by its bulk, Rebecca unlocked it, opened the door, and set the cake gentle down on the back seat, wiggling it slightly to ensure it would be steady on the drive.

Then she shut the door and tromped up the path to the driveway, ignoring the reporters and reminding herself that putting up this sign would _make_ them leave. Once she was inside the small building that served as a garage and shed, she quickly found her favorite hammer, a pail of nails, and the signs that read "Private Property â€" Keep Out."

They were all shiny new, gifts from John once the reporters began harassing her. He had put his up quickly, but that hadn't stopped the reporters from ganging up at the head of his driveway and almost making it impossible for him to get into his house.

Reminded of the gentle giant, Rebecca sent a quick prayer to whatever deity might be listening, hoping it or they would keep him safe,

wherever he was. She then quickly trooped back to her truck and started it, turning the heater off until the engine warmed up, which would take but seconds.

Carefully, so as to not drive over anything important, Rebecca turned the truck towards her driveway and crept towards the gaggle of reporters. Once she was in the driveway, they immediately converged on her vehicle; she had already locked the doors as a precaution, though technically it would be illegal for them to open the doors.

Rebecca rolled down her window and waved the sign at the camera trying to invade her personal bubble. "Look, I'm posting this now. You have fair warning â€" get off my property!" Resolutely, she shoved the camera back and rolled the window back up quickly so it couldn't come back and prevent her from leaving. Then, being very careful of the bodies pressed around her truck, she headed for the mouth of her driveway.

Once there, and with the reporters now packing up sullenly into their vans, Rebecca left her truck running and jumped out with the tools and signs. For good measure, she decided to post one each on the two trees framing the entrance to her land and then another two about ten feet in, so no one could claim they missed the signs. She hammered the nails in securely, too, so wind wouldn't easily tear them off.

Her chore finished and her breath steaming, Rebecca climbed back into her truck and drove carefully â€" mindful of the cake in the back seat â€" towards the opposite side of the valley. By the time she got back, if her driveway wasn't clear and the reporters not gone from her land, she would be very angry, she decided.

However, she shook the cloud from her mind and focused on being happy â€" it was her brother's birthday, after all. She had much to be grateful for, too; Miss Boy was growing well, though still confined to the barn during this cold snap. It was very strange, for early May, to have such a cold day, but these were the mountains, and anything could happen here.

Rebecca quickly crossed the highway and drove up the short road to Luke's house. She was one of the first to arrive, she noticed â€" only Luke's truck and his girlfriend's small red car were parked in front of his house. She had probably stayed the night.

Rebecca parked neatly next to her brother's green truck and gathered up the cake. Luke met her at the door, grinning.

"Well, hello, sister!" he said excitedly, eyeing the box. "Is that my cake?"

"Yes, it is, and you don't get to see it yet," Rebecca scolded as the man reached for it. He pouted at her and beckoned for her to come inside. "How are you?"

"Good, good. We're nearly ready. You're a little early, but that's just fine. I could use some help setting the table, if you're up for it."

"I certainly am," Rebecca answered, smiling. "I'm hungry enough to

eat a horse."

"Well, I don't have a horse, but Jessica brought a beautiful glazed ham."

Rebecca sniffed the air and caught the scent of said food roasting. "It smells amazing. Jessica?"

"In the kitchen!" came the prompt reply. Jessica had heard them talking; Rebecca bustled inside, leaving her boots and jacket at the door. She quickly put the cake down as the lithe Jessica enveloped her in a hug. "Oh, you look so cold!" she tittered, pushing a warm mug of some dark liquid at her boyfriend's sister. "Drink up, drink up. Can't have you catching a cold, now, can we?" She winked merrily and scooted towards the box with the cake. "Made a cake, did you?"

Rebecca took a breath to reply but Jessica ran right over her. "Oh, it's simply lovely! You've outdone yourself this time, my dear. Oooo, what beautiful writing. Come on, drink up! The guests will arrive any minute!" Giggling, Jessica scurried to the stove and stirred the warm pot of home-made apple cider; chunks of orange peel, cinnamon, and celery stalks floated near the top.

The younger woman sipped at her cider, smiling slightly. Jessica's enthusiasm was wearying to some, but Rebecca herself enjoyed the older woman's ability to make everyone feel welcome and carefree. Once her cider was done, she quickly refilled her own mug despite Jessica's chuckling assertion that she would do it herself and unpacked the cake. She stuck the candles in it — the tradition of one candle per year would have ruined the beautiful cake so she stuck to eight, spaced between the sugar candies along the rim of the round dessert.

The doorbell rang and Rebecca intercepted Luke before he could answer it, telling him to go wait in the living room. After all, he was the guest of honor — she would answer the door. And, she added severely, he was to stay away from the kitchen.

Jessica supplied her with mugs of hot cider so that every guest who came in — there were a good two dozen total — was immediately handed something warm to drink, to drive the chill from their bones. As the afternoon crept on and the guests stopped arriving, the party started. Music played between the living and dining rooms; in the living room, people mingled and talked, some ribbing Luke good-naturedly about his "old age" of forty-six. In the dining room, Jessica and Rebecca worked together to keep the appetizers and hors d'oeuvres hot and fresh.

The older woman sliced the baked ham into bite-sized pieces with crackers and several types of cheese to mix and match as the younger one mixed together pretzels, chocolate pieces, and other small hand foods to make trail mixes. They doled out cider to any asking; Rebecca placed the cake in the fridge to keep it cold and to protect it from curious fingers.

Once all the guests were full from the hours of meandering between living and dining rooms, everyone gathered in the dining room for the traditional birthday song, sang with great gusto as Rebecca finally brought out the much-awaited cake, candles aflame. Luke blew them out

comically as the song ended, eyeing each one to ensure his little sister hadn't bought the relighting candles. However, once put out, they stayed dark, so he quickly pulled them from the cake, licked the frosting from the bottom, and served out pieces to all of his friends happily.

Once everyone had eaten their slice of cake, guests began leaving slowly, taking with them small gifts of food and well-wishes from Luke. The ancient tradition of receiving gifts on one's birthday had given way, in many places, to giving them. Though some still practiced bringing gifts to the birthday person, it was generally considered more polite to send guests on their way with packages of food " and mugs of cider, in this case. The mugs would be returned later, if at all; nearly everyone in Yuray had a mug of someone else's because of this cider tradition that accompanied birthdays, after-plow parties, and other celebrations. Jessica made some of the best cider in the county, too.

Finally, the last group of guests waved and hopped into their cars as Jessica, Rebecca, and Luke wished them well and safe travels. The trio went back inside to begin cleaning up; Luke started in the living room, Rebecca in the dining room, and Jessica in the kitchen, washing the myriad of dishes that seemed to take up every spot of clean counter space.

Once everything was swept or vacuumed and the dishes dried and put back into the cupboards, Rebecca hugged her brother, was swept into an enthusiastic hug by Jessica, and departed herself, leaving the cake remnants for Luke.

Rebecca couldn't help but grin when she drove down her driveway only to find it empty " no reporters were hounding at her car. She could, once again, park in her own driveway, off to the side, on the gravel where the tires wouldn't crush dormant grass. Her walk to the front door was slow, unhurried by the presence of screaming reporters at her back.

Chichi bounded up when Rebecca stepped inside and the woman ruffled her ears lovingly. "Yes, Chichi, you're a good girl," she giggled as the dog licked her hand lovingly. "Let's do our chores now, alright?" Chichi barked assent and led the way towards the back door. "Ah, Chichi, this way. We don't have to use the back door now."

Once they were back on the front lawn, Chichi seemed confused at the absence of the group of humans usually on the driveway; she sniffed about there for a few seconds and then promptly squatted. Rebecca headed for the barn while the dog did her business; Miss Valentine and her filly greeted the woman with twin neighs of welcome. Miss Boy was learning quickly; she rattled her mother's grain bucket and then came to the stall door, hoping for a treat that her dam so obviously enjoyed. However, she wasn't close to weaning, so Rebecca gave her a ruffle behind her floppy ears as she fed Miss V a carrot.

Lover Boy and Rose Red, feeling left out, reminded her loudly that they were her favorite stallions. Giggling, Rebecca gave them a carrot each as well, stroking their soft muzzles and foreheads. "Would you like to do a little riding today, Boy?" Rebecca murmured as she fed Lover Boy a treat and reached for his bridle. Noticing her hand from the corner of his eye, Lover Boy tossed his head happily, pawing eagerly at the stable door.

"Alright, easy, Boy." Rebecca slipped into the stall and slid the stallion's halter off, quickly replacing it with the bit-less bridle. Unlike some traditional riders, she trained her horses to respond to neck reining, not bits. She quickly saddled the horse and they walked out of the barn, though Rebecca paused to grab a head lamp on the way out.

She rechecked the girth at the edge of the pasture and, sure enough, it was loose â€" Lover Boy had held his breath while she had tacked him up in the barn. Scolding him gently, she retightened the girth and then swung into the saddle with practiced ease. Once settled atop Lover Boy, she whistled for Chichi, who came bounding out of the woods towards them, and turned the stallion's head towards the fences.

There hadn't been any high winds lately but it had been at least a week since Rebecca had last ridden along the fences, checking for damaged poles or gates. Chichi opened and closed the gates for her so she didn't have to dismount and remount with a rope and pulley system the woman had invented just for this purpose.

Lover Boy frisked and pranced for the first hour; Rebecca let him get his energy out with the occasional canter and then returned to their task quickly. They walked sedately along the fence line; the pastures were empty now but, come spring, she had plans to bring in a small flock of sheep. Rebecca's barn was growing; she had surplus money and wanted to diversify her animals. Plus, her goats could use the company, and Chichi had the training to be a sheep dog.

With that in mind, Rebecca and Lover Boy finally turned back for home just as full dark nipped at their heels. The sun had gone down a long time ago, but thanks to the full moon, it remained light enough for Lover Boy, with the help of Rebecca's headlamp, to pick his way into the barn neatly. Once inside, Rebecca dismounted with a slight groan for weary muscles, unsaddled the stallion, and groomed him carefully, checking for burrs and ticks on his legs out of habit. She then switched his bridle for the halter â€" there was little enough difference â€" and fed him a small amount of grain for a job well done.

Then, Rebecca and Chichi went into the house and the woman prepared herself a warm dinner to drive the chill from her bones. Chichi curled up on her feet as she turned the TV on, flicking to a news channel when her favorite TV station refused to cough up anything more interesting than "Men on Mars: A History of Humanity on the Red Planet."

"_Well, Tim, what's on the agenda for this hour's news?"_ the woman on the TV asked her co-host, apparently named Tim, with a falsified smile.

"_First, we'll go live to _The Double-Edged Blade_, where Admiral Hood, the Arbiter Thel 'Vadam, CEO Justin Jacobson of _TerraFORM_, board representative Kadice Bultika of _Yes to Tech_, and other leaders in humanity's attempts to recover from the recent war are on route to Treaty, the planet that will play host to some of the most important talks of this century. With the help of civilian leaders, Admiral Hood and the Arbiter 'Vadam will attempt to negotiate a peace treaty with the Jiralhanae, known colloquially as the Brutes, in

order to stall â€" or avoid altogether â€" a second war. Also with them, as head of security, is Spartan-117, also known as John Leonidas, and hopefully our reporter will track him down for a quick interview." _

The woman on the couch frowned slightly â€" she hadn't known that a news crew was going with John on the _Blade_. But it made sense â€" the public had to be kept informed, after all. News had been scarce and rumor-filled during the war, because reporters refused to go into battle and captains were hardly willing to carry extra mouths to feed that couldn't fight. Such necessity had prompted the development and improvement of prototype human-less cameras, which could be controlled from a station or would track the biggest sources of noises â€" or a human target â€" through battle fields to bring intelligence and news-worthy video to the biggest corporations on Earth.

"_Then, we're going to talk to Mr. Sandusky, author of "Heroes in Green: ODS'T, Spartans, and Other Special Weapons" and premier professor of history and warfare within the known universe. "Heroes in Green" is his greatest achievement, says Mr. Sandusky; it's a tale told from the bits and pieces that are known about top-secret weapons and technology research done during the Covenant War."_ Rebecca shook her head slightly. The e-book had gone viral within moments of its availability as conspiracy-hungry humans devoured the apparent "secrets" behind the Spartan's training â€" most of which, she knew from John, were actually true â€" that Mr. Sandusky, writing under an alias, had discovered through illegal taps and bribes.

"_Finally, we'll join our anchor Virginia in New Dehli, where she will show us the stage for June's highly-awaited concert by "Niche Fighters." If you haven't heard of this band, you must be living under a rock. Lead vocalist Jimmy Salva will lead Virginia on a tour of the stage and give us a sneak-peak of the fun and excitement awaiting the 300,000-sized crowd. Twenty VIPs will get back-stage passes; we're giving one away during to tour to one random lucky watcher, who will be notified via e-mail within 72 hours of the tour."_

Rebecca rolled her eyes. These multi-billion corporations spent millions putting on a concert for the wealthy while children were left homeless and guardian-less in orphanages. While Rebecca wasn't a believer in complete wealth distribution, she did think a company would better spend its profits making those children more comfortable. However, humanity needed a distraction, she guessed. Rebecca turned her attention back to the news anchor.

"_Our studio is connecting currently with co-anchor Louise. Louise, can you hear me?"_ Tim asked, smiling and glancing slightly off-camera towards a teleprompter, most likely.

"_Loud and clear, Tim. How's the weather there?"_ Slightly blurry, a woman's hologram bust appeared on the TV. She appeared to be in front of a bulkhead; the grey steel behind her looked cold, cramped, and uninviting.

"_Well, it's currently 28 degrees and beautifully sunny here; families are picnicking in the park, tanning, and saying goodbye to winter weather," _Tim answered with a laugh. Rebecca glanced outside; in the Rockies, winter holding on with fierce

determination.

"_Sounds amazing. I'm here in _The Double-Edged Blade_, where the weather is a constant 20 degrees and no sun has touched my skin in days. We're on our second Slipspace transition, leap-frogging so that the Brutes cannot track our entry vector back to Earth when we arrive at Treaty." _Louise began walking; the camera followed steadily as they wove through mostly-deserted corridors with the reporter narrating their journey._ "We're now heading for the bridge, where Admiral Hood is overseeing the flight of this ship. Most of the crew is in cryo, including several of my fellow anchors._

"_Due to the top-secret nature of the technology on board, mostly adapted from Sangheili â€" Elite â€" ships, we are not allowed to film directly inside the bridge. However, Admiral Hood will be joining us outside for a quick interview. _

"_And here we have the cafeteria."_ The cold, grey room was inhabited by several humans and a few Elites, sharing table space and conversation with humans. The seats were mobile, a design not usually used in ships to avoid collisions, so the human and Sangheili soldiers could eat separately or together. _"Hello, soldiers. May we butt in for a moment?"_

One of the Sangheili, apparently willing to act as spokesperson for the staged group, turned and nodded gracefully. _"Of course, ma'am. I am Minor Ebon. These are my comrades, of the Hybrid Team Alpha."_ The humans and Sangheili around him turned to face the camera, some grinning â€" though the Sangheili smile was slightly intimidating.

"_Lovely to meet you. I'm Louise, of News On Demand, Inc. I'm here to inform the public about the current state of affairs as to this mission. What is your role â€" as a team â€" in this journey?"_ Louise tilted her head as though she hadn't already gone through this "interview" before.

"_We are here as security,"_ Minor Ebon answered, flexing his mandibles slightly. _"Our teams â€" Alpha and Beta â€" will rotate through during the talks to ensure peace and civility during the discussions between our allied races and the Jiralhanae."_

"_And you train under Master Chief 117, correct?"_

Minor Ebon affected a slight chuckle. _"Yes, ma'am, that is correct. We are honored to be trained by such a fierce warrior as the Demon."_

"_What's he like, as a trainer?"_

A human snorted; the camera centered on his face as he answered. The reply was clearly not especially scripted. _"He works us to the bone, ma'am, but we're getting better at working together. He's an amazing fighter, and he knows a hell of a lot â€" pardon my language."_

"_What kind of drills do you do to prepare for the worst, should it come to pass that the Brutes attack during the talks?"_

"_We practice against the Demon and a few of his hand-picked helpers

â€" the Arbiter and Veteran Sangheili. They stand in as Brutes and we have to work on taking them down without endangering ourselves or our packages." _

"_Your packages?" _

The men in the group shared sniggers at the wording Minor Ebon had accidentally used. _"Those we are there to protect, such as the Admiral and human leaders." _

"_Will we be able to see a training session later?" _ Louise asked eagerly.

Minor Ebon blinked and clicked his mandibles. _"I am not sure. You would have to ask the Demon. He is in charge, after all." _

"_Of course." _ Rebecca didn't think it likely that John would allow cameras in his training gym â€" but then again, the Admiral might encourage it. _"Thank you for your time, soldiers." _ Louise led the way out as the humans and Sangheili turned back to their food, murmuring amongst each other.

"_And that is the future of the UNSC, if Admiral Hood has his say," _ Louise said as the camera followed her down another corridor. _"Hybrid teams of humans and Sangheili. The Elites are much stronger, faster, and tougher than humans when paired one-on-one, but apparently, humans are smarter and more creative. Several researchers in this new field of Sangheili culture believe this is due to their imitative and militarian society. Elites base every aspect of their life on war and religion; young ones are sent into training as soon as they can walk, basically. They are taught to defend their religion, respect the Forerunners, and â€" more recently â€" work with humans. _

"_And here we have the bridge. As I said before, we're not allowed inside with the camera, but Admiral Hood should be joining us quickly." _

The door hissed open and John in his giant green armor stepped through, clearly not expecting the camera outside by the way he stopped quickly. He towered over Louise, who blinked up at him and then recovered and beamed. Rebecca sat up slightly; John looked very imposing, surrounded by the grey steel of a ship. She didn't recognize the large gun apparently magnetically attached to the back of his suit, but it simple made him more intimidating.

~~Perspective/Time Warp~~

John saluted quickly. "Master Chief reporting for duty, sir," he said to the Admiral, who had turned when he walked in. His feet made clunking sounds against the floor, because he wasn't taking pains to keep his footsteps silent.

"Excellent. I have a small side-mission for you, Chief. At ease." Admiral Hood smiled slightly and flicked his fingers towards the view screens. "We seem to be having a small miscalculation. New Start is fixing it, but I should stay here to oversee the process. Which means I'll need a suitable replacement for the news reporter who should be here any moment."

John bit back a slight sigh. He'd been avoiding the news crew on board thus far, and had hoped to continue that.

"I would like you to entertain Louise, if you would be so kind."

Cortana murmured in the internal speakers for the Spartan's ears alone. "There's no problem that actually requires his oversight. I think the Admiral is dodging the press."

John smirked slightly and addressed the Admiral smartly. "Certainly, sir."

"Don't let her interfere with your basic business. I know you'll be doing a hanger drill today. I'm sure she would appreciate seeing the precision and discipline of your troops."

John had hoped to dump the woman with an excuse of having to train his troops " but apparently, the Admiral had foreseen that and wanted Louise fully occupied. "Of course, sir," the Chief answered calmly.

"Dismissed. And thank you."

John saluted and headed for the main transit out of the bridge. He stepped through and almost stepped on a young woman, clearly a reporter from the camera following her, held up by a strong young man. John stopped and composed himself " it was just another mission, after all.

"Well, what a lucky coincidence. Master Chief, we were just about to go looking for you." Louise grinned.

John saw his warm golden visor reflected in the camera's lens. "Admiral Hood sends his apologies but cannot make it to your interview." The Spartan kept his voice devoid of all emotion, calm yet strong. Louise groaned softly.

"Is something wrong?"

"You are safe and we are not lost. Other than that, I am not authorized to share more information." Cortana sniggered in the helmet and made a comment about John's stubbornness.

"Then we'll just have to interview you!" Louise said brightly, placing her hand on John's forearm armor as though to hold him there.

"I am on my way to my troops. You may walk with me and attend our training session." Clearly, the Admiral wanted to keep the reporter from poking her nose into the bridge or exploring on her own and possibly getting into trouble.

"Sounds excellent. So, tell me, why are you here?"

John began walking away; the reporter hurried after him, taking two steps to his one, and the camera arranged itself to fly backwards, facing the pair. "I am head of security and in charge of Double Trouble, the Alpha and Beta Hybrid Teams."

"Didn't you retire?" Louise huffed slightly; John consciously slowed his stride and she grinned gratefully, though his golden visor remained impenetrable.

"Only temporarily. It was understood that I would come back the moment humanity required my skills."

"What about the Spartan-IVs? Why aren't they here?"

John blinked. He hadn't exactly been expecting such a question, and he didn't really have a good answer himself. "They are spread thin already, keeping the peace and guarding ongoing negotiations between humans and Sangheili, or hunting down pockets of spies and would-be separatists. There are also few of them, and they are not tested against Brutes. Their augmentations and training are not as thorough as mine were, but they are excellent soldiers nonetheless. My reputation as the Demon will make the Jiralhanae recognize me immediately."

"Are you planning on having to fight during the talks?"

"I plan for the worst scenario."

"Which is?"

This time, Cortana answered "and obviously confused Louise. "Statistically, the worst-case scenario is that the Brutes show up with a full fleet and blast us from orbit. But I think the Master Chief is concentrating on what he can prevent " like a Brute attack at the table."

Louise blinked. "Is that Cortana?" she asked after a moment of hesitation.

"It is," John answered. "She is riding along to provide intel and to give New Start " the Blade's smart AI " freedom in the Blade's systems."

"Are you glad to be working together again?"

"Cortana and I function well together and my operating capacity improves greatly with her boosting my response time and coordinating with ship crews while we are on the planet."

"How does it work?"

John shrugged slightly in his armor and they turned a corner. A Sangheili engineer warbled a greeting and stepped out of the way; the Spartan nodded to the salute from the alien and then answered the reporter. "That information is classified."

Louise pouted and then asked, "Are you glad to be back in your armor, John?"

"While I am in the UNSC, my official designation is Sierra-117 or Master Chief S-117," John responded with a touch of ice in his voice. Louise nodded in understanding. "I am glad that I can serve again, but the circumstances are not ideal."

"Do you think the Brutes will agree to a treaty?"

John hesitated and then turned another corner, his pace increasing just slightly. "I doubt it. I have fought them for years â€" they live for nothing but war and destruction. The best we can hope for is a mutual contract to stay out of each other's business. With the Sangheili and Unggoy â€" the Grunts â€" as our allies, we could survive a war between our races. But it would be very costly, especially since our population is decimated already."

They turned into the cafeteria again; the group from before was talking and laughing. They had been joined by about two dozen more Sangheili and human soldiers; one spotted them and jumped up, barking, "Officer on deck." The rest of the beings in the room stood, turned, and saluted.

"DT," John snapped crisply. "Gather your uniforms, boys and girls. We touch down in twenty-four Earth hours and I intend to be planet-side fifteen minute past that; we'll be practicing in the main hanger. Move it!"

There was a general stampede around the Chief and Louise, who shielded herself from the running soldiers behind the Spartan's bulk. Once all thirty or so troops had gone, the Spartan turned to the door and led the way deeper into the ship. The camera bobbed along.

"Where did "Double Trouble" come from, Chief?" Louise asked as she trotted along beside the Spartan.

"Every group of soldiers is given an official name â€" such as "Hybrid Troops Alpha" - that they are listed as in the official books. However, most groups also form secondary nicknames, such as "Double Trouble" or "Helljumpers," in the case of the ODSs."

"Did your Spartans have nicknames for their teams?" Louise asked curiously.

John hesitated before answering slowly. "We had teams â€" Red, Blueâ€" And we had nicknames for each other. But the teams were mixed a lot, so we didn't give any group a permanent nickname." He flashed back to when Linda had received her nickname "Xmas" â€" early on in their training, Linda's capabilities with the sniper rifle were proved unmatched, and for Christmas they were given a special treat at dinner â€" a piece of cake â€" which put everyone in a good mood. Someone had commented on the traditional colors for Christmas, red and green, like blood and pine needles, and then on Linda's green eyes and red hair. It had been decided, then and there, that Linda's nickname would refer to her unusual coloring and skills.

"What was your nickname?" Louise's voice dragged John back to the present.

The Spartan shook his head slightly. "We do not share them outside of our group." He didn't really want anyone to share the kind of bond that secret nicknames made, whispered as kids or yelled between gunshots.

"But you are the last, are you not?"

"Several of my brothers and sisters are still missing," John answered icily. "There is yet the chance they are alive." He didn't like to be reminded that there had been no word "except "still missing" and "no sign" " about his brothers and sisters still lost in the depths of space or on glassed planets. Some part of him clung to the hope that he would see them again, in this life if not the next.

"Still. Surely your fans want to know."

John ignored her and stepped into a large room; two lines of humans and Sangheili were standing at attention, decked out in armored suits. The Elites wore the blue-purple of Minors with green highlights, a concession to human tradition. The humans wore green mesh suits with patched of armor over their chests, backs, upper arms, and thighs. They had no weapons but, instead, carried packs stuffed to the brim with tents, food, medical supplies, and other necessities for building a comfortable camp on Treaty's semi-arid soil.

The camera and Louise backed to a corner where John indicated they could stand and stay out of the way; the Spartan turned to his troops and surveyed them silently for a moment before barking out a crisp series of orders. The humans and Sangheili soldiers snapped to with remarkable speed and efficiency; they had run this drill hundreds of times. Several branched off into a group and ran for the supplies piled in the back of the hanger; the rest split up into the Pelican hybrids.

John watched silently as those at the supplies began ferrying them into Pelicans. One of the jumpiest privates, MacDougal, tripped slightly but caught himself and hurried forward, a blush burning his cheeks. The Spartan took note of those who chuckled at the minor slip-up and then focused on the Pelicans themselves.

The pilots, having seen the drill in progress, decided to mess with the troops and began their own drill. Momentarily, chaos reigned as the pilots, engineers, and DT troops tried to work around the same Pelicans.

John allowed the chaos to continue, testing his troop's ability to cope with unexpected burdens. One of the senior pilots winked at the Spartan; the Chief flashed a quick thumb's up back, a signal that the drill was going well and to call a halt to it.

The senior pilot corralled her troops and they disappeared again, probably heading for the cafeteria. They kept slightly irregular hours compared to the rest of the ship, sleeping and eating in shifts so enough pilots were awake and ready at any moment, should the Pelicans be needed.

The Spartan surveyed his soldiers; they seemed a little miffed by the interruption but finished loading and then locking themselves into the Pelican hybrids quickly.

"All set, sit!" Private Ebon called when all had strapped in. The Chief checked every soldier's straps, yanking them back and forth to ensure they wouldn't fall out the ass end of the transports, and then eyed the supply arrangements.

"Well done," he finally said, making his voice slightly disappointed

on purpose. "For maggots. If we're in the middle of a combat zone, I expect you all to be able to work around the pilots and engineers. We'll retire to the gym, girls and boys. On the double."

The soldiers quickly slapped the quick-releases and trotted out of the hanger; John turned to follow them, motioning for Louise to come with. She was slightly wide-eyed as she trotted after the Chief.

"Will it be like that when we arrive at Treaty?" she asked. "It was so chaotic."

John shook his head. "The pilots and engineers won't be deliberately getting in the way of the Double Trouble troops. And it won't be a mad scramble â€" we'll have time to get set up, but the time the leaders get loaded up."

"Those ships didn't look like standard Pelicans. What are they?"

"Some are refitted Pelicans that survived the war. Others are newly built, a fusion of Sangheili and human technologies. They're faster, stronger, and lighter. They have an official designation, but for the most part, we call them "Peliships" â€" though a more creative name is in the works."

"A fusion of "Pelicans" and "dropships" â€" I see."

They entered a large room, where the troops from before were lined up and waiting, breathing steadily and showing no sign of having run to the gym. Once again, Louise stood and observed in a corner; John turned his full attention to the troops.

Cortana had already alerted the Arbiter and his selected four Veterans â€" they appeared just as John was reprimanding a few of the soldiers for stumbling or missing a crate in the recent hanger drill. The troops, upon seeing their faux Brutes, shifted slightly; John called them all sharply to order and then numbered out three teams of ten each. Over the past week, he had gotten an idea of which groups worked best together, and what soldiers had rivalries or competitions.

The twenty soldiers not in the combat simulation stood off to the side, grinning and making silent bets as the "Brutes" â€" the Veteran Elites, Arbiter, and Spartan â€" faced off with the chosen team of ten humans and Elite Minors.

John ignored the betting â€" he had seen it before and, secretly, was amused at the prospect of an Elite gambling â€" and signaled for the drill to begin. He immediately went for one of the weakest in the group, a human Private named Selenason, too young to usually be considered for combat, especially as dangerous as this.

Immediately, Private Ebon saw the Spartan's intention and came to his friend's defense; together, Selenason and Ebon defended themselves against the Spartan's assault, though they were hard-pressed to offer any sort of offense. It generally took two humans and an Elite to successfully bring down one of the "Brutes," odds that were slowly moving towards a team of two Elites or an Elite/human pair.

One of the Veteran Elites warbled a surrender and moved off the field, having been attacked by three humans and defeated. John didn't let his attention waiver, even though there were three more "enemies" on the field now; he focused on removing his biggest threat, Ebon.

Ebon slid out of range and then threw himself forward; John blinked, slightly put off by unusual attack, and Selenason dove for his legs. The Spartan rolled backwards, being careful not to crush the human underneath him, fighting to kick Ebon off of his chest.

Another weight hit the three "another Minor, seeing the stalemate, had broken from his attack on the Arbiter to take out the Spartan. John felt what could be a crippling blow at the base of his neck and immediately barked, "Alright, I'm dead."

The human slithered off of his feet; Ebon and the other Minor moved away and back into the fray. John stood quickly and moved off of the battle field; he saw two of the Privates, Smithers and Newbery, exchange grins as he removed his helmet to check for damage to it. He ignored the camera as it came a little closer. He tried to remove his helmet a few times during every training session, to pound home the fact that he was, indeed, human and not some war machine. That particular rumor still annoyed him greatly.

The battle was quickly over "all of the "Brutes" had successfully been neutralized, the Arbiter standing the longest before going down under a furious assault by five Elite Minors at once.

John whistled for the troops to face him. "Excellent teamwork. The tactic that took me down will work well on an enraged Brute. If you see one taken down by your teammates, immediately move to neutralize it. Given enough time, I would have thrown Privates Ebon and Selenason "but Private Lano saw and came to take one "Brute" from the fight. Let's see you do it again, next time. Rotate."

The "Brutes" lined up again; John resealed his helmet. Lano had been careful not to permanently damage the armor, for which the Spartan was grateful. Having to repair it now, just before they landed, would be stressing.

They continued with the rotations, letting each group of ten attack the six "Brutes" twice. A stark difference from the beginning of the trip, most of the matches were won by Double Trouble. Once John felt sufficiently winded, he called for two of the groups to face each other, in order to mix up their training slightly.

Louise eventually left of her own accord as it became clear that the training wasn't going to stop anytime soon. John was glad to see her go.

17. The Peace Talks

I apologize for the delay with the last chapter; Thanksgiving was hectic and I didn't feel like opening my computer. In order to make it up, here's the next chapter a week early. Please be aware that this is a very gory chapter. Readers with sensitive stomachs may want to skim through it.

_Dear Anon: Yes, I know "Bravo" is technically correct â€" but I've always preferred "Beta" and can imagine it developing as such within the five hundred years between now and when Halo takes place, if that makes sense. Also, the MC is practically the most decorated person in the UNSC, so I took a little liberty with "officer," on part of the DT troops. But thank you for pointing those out. And I would have replied in a PM except that your review was, well, anonymous.

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****Chapter 16: The Peace Talks****

John stood at attention as Thel, Admiral Hood, and the rest of the leaders took their seats on the chairs they had brought. His Double Trouble team surrounded the human/Elite side of the table, standing at ease and weaponless. The Elites and humans were interchanged, spaced in such a manner that would allow the leaders to flee between them if necessary. John stood at the pinnacle of the horseshoe, just behind Admiral Hood.

The camera man and Louise stood off to one side; they had orders to avoid drawing attention to themselves. It would be difficult to explain to the Brutes what a camera was, and why the public needed to be kept informed back on the humans' home planet.

The Brutes showed up quickly, the War Chieftain leading the way. He grunted and hunkered down onto his haunches, as did the Chieftains behind him, when he approached the table. John knew it was an insult in their culture, but it cost the humans and Elites nothing to ignore it.

The War Chieftain bellowed, thumping a fist to his chest and grunted in the guttural language of the Jiralhanae. The translator strapped to his head spoke for him, projecting the words utterly devoid of emotion.

"We are here. We will talk," it said robotically. "This one before you is War Chieftainâ€" It couldn't pronounce the name. "Famed for the killing of many Sangheili and humans in his glorious years of leadership. Those with him are Chieftains, the bravest and strongest of the Jiralhanae packs."

John didn't know why the Brute was speaking in third personâ€" perhaps it was just the translator. John shifted, already uneasy as the unbathed scent of the Brutes reached his sensitive nose. The War Chieftain roared at him, stepping forward and standing to his full three-meter height. "You!" The translator's voice was monotonic, so it didn't have quite the same effect. The War Chieftain was foaming at the mouth. "The Demon comes to the talks. It is a machine of war. You have betrayed these most inglorious events."

John turned on his own translator and said calmly, before Hood could address the War Chieftain, "Great War Chieftain, I come merely to stretch my legs."

The subtle insult was lost on the Brutes. John's apparent supplication â€" calling him "honored" went a long way with the self-centered alien â€" had the Brute back on his haunches, crisis averted. The Double Trouble troopers subtly relaxed around their leader.

"We're here to discuss Covenant Loyalist and Human/Sangheili borders and territories," Hood said quickly, taking charge of the situation. "It is our wish to live peacefully with your kind, War Chieftain."

The Brute growled and waved his giant paws as he yelled a response. "Peace is for the weaklings," the translator said choppily, clearly having trouble finding appropriate words. "The honorable warriors of the Way require your total obedience to our kings. You will return to the bright path of the Forerunners, Sangheili, honored as you are to walk within its light, though the weight of your heresy in destroying one of the Holy Rings will stay your feet when the path is once again walked. Humans will remove their presence from the galaxy, stinking as they do in the noses of the holy Forerunners."

"Neutrality will cost you nothing," Hood continued firmly. "We are willing to be quite generous in our terms. We only wish safe travel, acknowledgement of our ownership of planets that were glassed during the war, and peace between our races. We will have no economic trade between our kinds. You may ignore us and continue down your glorious path so long as it avoids all UNSC- or Sangheili-held space."

"The Forerunners turn their glorious backs upon those who do not follow their path," one of the Chieftains growled. The War Chieftain turned with a snarl and snapped at the younger Brute, who cowered back instantly.

"This one finds your conditions unacceptable. It is impossible for humans to understand the truth of the glorious light of the Forerunners. Clearly you have tainted the weak Sangheili as well." The Elites in the group bristled; the War Chieftain's beady little eyes sparkled. "All of this universe belongs to the Forerunners and their servants as they walk the path set before them."

Thel spoke up, quietly. "You have been led astray, mighty War Chieftain." Flattery went a long way with the Brutes, John noticed as the War Chieftain straightened, puffing out his chest even as he growled. "The most holy of Forerunners did not mean for the Holy Rings to be used to purify the universe and show the Path. They are weapons only to be used if the most unholy Flood escape their prisons. The true path lies in the light and glory of advanced civilization, free of war and terror and famine and all evils that plague life."

"These are heretic lies," the War Chieftain hissed. "The holy Oracle told this one personally that the Holy Rings are artifacts of the ancient Forerunners, relics to their glorious power and truth. They light the path and show the faithful the way to salvation and glory." The Chieftains grunted in agreement.

John was getting tired of the flowery speeches as the Arbiter and War Chieftain compared Forerunner writings. Thel clearly still believed in the Forerunners as gods, though with a little cynicism as well. The War Chieftain was absolutely convinced that the Halos were meant to guide the faithful into a paradise.

"Whether the Forerunners meant for the rings to be used as lights of truth or weapons of destruction is not of concern to these discussions," Hood finally said sharply. Thel leaned back slightly, conceding the point. "This is a diplomatic opportunity for the

Jiralhanae, humans, and Sangheili to prove that they can live in peace. Do your Forerunners not state that peace is the highest form of civilization?"

"Indeed," Thel rumbled. "To be with peace is to be with the Forerunners. Many warriors reach that peace just before they die in a glorious battle, upholding the values of the Forerunner gods as they seek the path to truth and enlightenment."

"Peace is for the weak. This all Jiralhanae know, from baby to adult." John wasn't quite sure how Brutes reproduced, but judging by the translator's pause just before "baby," it wasn't quite like humans. He shuddered mentally to think of the brutality of the Brutes unleashed in a mating ritual. "The Forerunners wanted all sentient creatures to follow in their glorious footsteps. If they cannot see the light themselves, is it not a kindness to show blind creatures how to see? Is it not an act of kindness to put those who cannot be made to see out of their misery?"

"What one creature claims to see, another interprets," Thel argued. "There are those of us who do not so blindly follow the writings translated as they were by the treacherous San 'Shyuum. The Forerunners praised intelligence, too, and what is intelligence if not used to think for oneself?"

Hood discretely shook his head. The conversation was quickly veering back into the religious argument again. He subtly interrupted. "As we were saying, humans lay claim to the following planets. They were ours before the war. Billions of us died on them and defending them valiantly. We would recolonize them." He recited a long list of planets, all of those that had been glassed or abandoned during the war.

"Furthermore, the Sangheili lay claim to the following planets, including Sanghelios and Balaho. The Unggoy have allied themselves with the Sangheili." Thel listed a rather shorter list of planets, most of which, John knew, were used as mining platforms.

"You will not dictate the terms of your inglorious peace," the War Chieftain snarled. "You will obey the orders of the Forerunners. We follow their instructions, and we are their servants. If you choose to turn your faces from the light, you will find the darkness threatening and it will swallow you whole."

"The light of the truth of the Forerunners shines in all directions, War Chieftain," Thel answered calmly. "Our terms are absolute. If you choose not to see the higher path of intelligence, you will find yourself in shame. The glorious path will fade beneath your feet if you turn against the Forerunner truths of peace and intelligence. Thus the Arbiter speaks, as appointed by the San 'Shyuum and the Forerunners themselves."

"The Arbiter branded with the symbol of heresy," the War Chieftain hissed. "Your heresy stays your feet, blasphemer. You are not worthy to wear the symbol of the honorable Forerunners."

"My shame is that I so long fought for the San 'Shyuum lies, believing myself to follow the most glorious path of the Forerunners. But they have bent the true purpose of the Way. They seek only their own power and advancement. They threaten humanity because it is the

only race that lives outside of their influence, and will resist to the last man, woman, and child."

The War Chieftain stood, beating his chest with his hands and roaring a challenge. "How dare you dirty the air with your filthy lies, heretic!" he bellowed. Again, the translator did a very poor job of conveying the Brute's tone, but the War Chieftain himself was doing a fine job of it.

"Let's everyone calm down," Hood suggested. "We are here to negotiate a treaty between the Covenant Loyalists and the Sangehili, Unggoy and human alliance. Your religion matters not to us; we have several of our own, dedicated to following much the same path of enlightenment."

The Brute snorted, still standing. "You speak of peace like a crippled whore," the Brute snarled. The translator had obviously struggled to figure out how to present the Jiralhanae's words. "Only in war can a true warrior find glory and truth. Only with the blood of heretics and blasphemers can the path be followed."

"I see we are in disagreement, then," Hood said quietly. "Perhaps we shall continue the discussion later. Please consider discussing our terms, War Chieftain. It would mean many lives saved on both sides if we can come to a peaceful agreement. More lives to walk your path to enlightenment."

Hood stood and turned his back on the Brutes, unwittingly presenting the War Chieftain with a challenge. John saw the Brute's muscles flex and instinctively moved forward, placing himself between the Brutes and the Admiral. He stared at the large Brute calmly as it stood and towered almost a meter over him.

"You dare challenge me?" The War Chieftain roared again, pounding the ground savagely. The translator almost made John laugh as it made the Brute sound plaintive. "I have slain Demons before." The War Chieftain puffed out his chest, stalking forward on his side of the table.

John bristled; the entire arena filled with silence. He turned on his speakers and spoke quietly. "Chieftains fall easily before Demons."

"Chieftains do not match War Chieftains," the Brute bellowed. "Perhaps I shall take your head to mount upon my home alongside your brothers!"

There were utter silence in the arena; Hood stared. Surely John wasn't suicidal, but the Spartan was being goaded into a trap. The War Chieftain was at least a good two or three hundred pounds heavier, not to mention a hell of a lot stronger and taller. Yet John's voice was calm when he spoke.

"These discussions are for peace between our races," the Spartan reminded the War Chieftain. He turned around, activating his dorsal camera to keep an eye on the Brute.

Across the table, the War Chieftain stared at him, then broke out into deep laughter. "You, puny Demon? You dare to challenge a War Chieftain? Very well, then. I shall rip you limb from limb and feast

upon your entrails."

The War Chieftain bellowed and attacked; the Spartan quickly intercepted the attack, grabbing the Brute and throwing him back from the human's side of the table. He vaulted over the table to keep the War Chieftain away from the humans as he re-engaged his enemy, drawing the Brute's attention from the admiral and the other humans. He struck out as the armored Brute passed him, his fist bouncing off of thick armor. He slid sideways and back around, facing the Brute as it stampeded towards him again.

John was silent, mentally readying himself. The War Chieftain was, without a doubt, the biggest Brute John had come across. The Chieftains moved back, forming a half-circle. Slowly, prodded by the Sangheili to do the same, the humans surrounded the Chief on the other side. Chief and War Chieftain stared at each other. There was nothing to do now but finish the duel â€" the War Chieftain was out for blood.

John didn't react as the War Chieftain began beating the ground. The Chieftains struck up a beat themselves, seemingly ritualistic. John settled into a crouch, telling Cortana to be quiet so he could concentrate. He could feel Thel's eyes on him as the War Chieftain suddenly stilled, obviously waiting for a motion.

John knew Brutes went berserk easily. They were even more deadly when they were like that, but they were also more prone to making costly mistakes. Instead of displaying aggression, John simply raised a hand and beckoned the Brute forward, in an insultingly calm gesture.

John felt completely back in his element. He was faced with a clear enemy. It was attacking him. He had a purpose â€" defend himself and his teammates, destroy the threat, and bring peace forcefully to the shaky relations.

Secretly, John was pleased to be useful. Even if he died, he would take out the War Chieftain â€" which would probably result in a whole mess of civil war back on the Brute's home world as a new War Chieftain fought his way to the top. In either case, dead or alive, John would be doing what he did best â€" protecting.

The Brute wrapped one large hand around John's shoulder and flung him to the ground. John rolled quickly away, aware that being trapped under the Brute spelled certain death. He was just a shade too slow, though, and the War Chieftain landed a punch to his side that broke ribs even through his shields and armor. John could feel the sticky sensation of blood in his chest, and then his armor's biofoam injectors stabilized the shattered bones.

John moved again, bashing his fist into the War Chieftain's face. The Brute bellowed in anger and pain, spitting out a tooth. Behind his visor, John smirked. The War Chieftain dove forward suddenly, picking John up by the midsection and squeezing. John beat at the Brute's shoulders and head as it stood for a second and then threw him away, clearly realizing it wouldn't be able to break John's back in a bear-hug maneuver before John broke his skull.

John felt himself hit dirt and rolled, accidentally clipping a bystander â€" a Chieftain â€" as he did so. The Chieftain bellowed in rage, but didn't move and pushed John back into the circle, where the

War Chieftain attacked ferociously again. John gritted his teeth, tasting blood, as he felt his ribs begin to collapse. His armor injected biofoam again, enough to hold his chest cavity open and keep him breathing.

If he survived, he'd need a new set of lungs. And probably a few other things. He could feel the wet sensation that indicated he was bleeding internally somewhere.

The War Chieftain tried to bite John as the Spartan grabbed his head and butted his armored forehead forward, smacking the Brute in a classic move. The Brute grunted and then began pummeling John's sides; the Spartan ignored the damage it was doing to his midsection and beat on the Brute's head.

Thel watched the scene, worried. The Spartan was a true warrior; nimble, strong, agile, and deadly. But the War Chieftain didn't become head of the Jiralhanae with his good looks. Thel watched his friend closely, noting the fairly deep dents the Brute inflicted upon his armor.

John grunted as the Brute bashed him with its thick fists. He felt something crack in his pelvis and nearly faltered from the pain. Probably his pelvic bone, he thought grimly, shoving the Brute away. The beast stumbled slightly, clearly dazed. The Spartan had probably given it a good concussion.

Hood stared as the Chief finally uttered a sound, a harsh roar of challenge, and dove for the Brute, bearing them both to the ground. John was clearly flagging; blood was seeping from his armor. The Brute was bleeding in several places as well.

The two giants rolled, trading punches. John rolled on top for a moment and drove both fists into the Brute's stomach. Three great cracks sounded; the Brute roared in pain and fury, throwing the lighter Spartan " armor and all- - through the air. John was on his feet instantly, though Hood could tell by the slight falter in his step that he was badly injured.

John smiled grimly. He had managed to break the Brute's ribcage, which meant the giant beast would have trouble breathing soon. The Spartan could feel his pelvic bone grinding; Cortana did something to the controls and the gel layer instantly puffed up like they were in outer space. It pressurized and stabilized John's hips. It still felt like an elephant was sitting on his pelvis, but at least he could move more easily.

The Brute charged again, catching John head-on. John brought both elbows down onto the Brute's back; the War Chieftain roared in pain, but it sounded forced. John grimly assessed his opponent and decided that the Brute's lungs were collapsing. Still, it would take a long time for the War Chieftain to pass out from lack of air.

John set his feet, ignoring the pain as his muscles and bones screamed in protest, halting the Brute's charge. They stayed, straining, for a moment before John felt something tear and went down, the Brute on top of him. Instinctively, John lifted his arms just as the Brute struck, trying to bite and punch all at once. The War Chieftain's teeth scraped across his forearm's armor as his fists impacted John's badly-abused sides, crushing the biofoam currently

holding the Spartan together. John coughed up blood; it splattered his HUD.

"Hold on, John," Cortana whispered in his head. "You made a promise to Rebecca, remember? You have to make it back." She sounded almost desperate. John wondered why. Sure, he was beaten up, but he'd survived worse.

The War Chieftain on top of him drew his attention back to the present. The Brute raised his thick arms, ready to deliver a crushing blow. In a move John had learned from watching terrible old kung-fu movies, the Spartan heaved up just enough to throw the Brute off-balance; then, judging carefully, pushed himself with his feet and shot out from under the War Chieftain.

John stood, feeling like a charging herd of elephants was trampling his chest and pelvis. His ankle, too, screamed at him, but it was a lesser scream. "Let's dance, you and I," he muttered at the Brute who was already back on his feet. John ducked, swung, and felt his glove sink into flesh. The Brute howled and John disengaged, moving back.

The pair continued trading crushing blows, two giants trapped in a furious kill-or-be-killed fight, ringed by lesser giants. The humans stared, both in total fear and awe, as John survived and returned blows that would have separated most men from their bodies instantly. The Sangheili watched, tight-jawed, and the Brutes kept up their strange beat. John's heart thumped to match it, something primal in him roaring its way free as he felt his kneecap shatter under the Brute's fist.

With a roar of rage and pain, John took the Brute to the ground again, knees on either side of its chest and squeezing as his fists punched the Brute's armored head. The War Chieftain's skull cracked and he bellowed angrily, struggling harder. John rocked but grimly held on as the War Chieftain pummeled him with his fists. The Spartan ignored the pain as his shoulder shattered after a particularly hard punch, concentrating his entire being on beating the pulp out of the War Chieftain's brain.

Just as John felt his heart begin to beat erratically, which sent his HUD into a red-tinted warning state, the Brute gurgled as the Spartan's hand sank through its skull and into the brain beneath. John felt himself trembling â€" stunned that he could feel at all â€" as the War Chieftain's arms fell away. He tried to breathe in deeply, realizing calmly that his lungs had collapsed. It felt like everything had collapsed, in fact â€" his body felt flat.

John slowly picked his hand out of the crushed brains; it felt like it weighed a ton. His shoulder refused to respond when he ordered his arm to brace himself; his legs refused to let go of the Brute's body still clamped between them.

John was aware of a roaring in his head, in his heart, throughout his entire body. Dimly, he could hear Cortana yelling at him to stay awake. But John wanted to sleep â€" in fact, he thought, he could almost feel Rebecca's warm body snuggled against him, the fire dancing in front of them and Chichi lying at their feet, panting happily. John smiled slightly, looking beyond his HUD where he noticed suddenly that his heart rate monitor had popped up onto the

screen. Interestingly enough, it seemed to be malfunctioning â€" there weren't any blips.

"Cortana, have the technicians check the heart monitor," John ordered. "It saying I'm dead." Spartans don't die; everyone knew that. John coughed up more blood and stared at the pattern it made on his HUD. He was suddenly reminded of Sam's death â€" the first Spartan-II to die in combat. His best friend had been there, living and breathing, and thenâ€¦ Just gone.

At the time, John had been angry, confused â€" Dr. Halsey had said that they were going to be nearly invincible. Super-soldiers; the culmination of hundreds of generations of warriors. But even the strongest man couldn't fight the empty vacuum of space. It had taken him a long time to get over the loss of his teammate. John always won; his team always survived.

As the war had continued and John received word of more Spartan-II casualties, it had taken shorter and shorter periods of time for the Master Chief to forgive himself, Dr. Halsey, and the program for putting his friends and comrades in the path of danger. Though he knew they wanted to be there, and they were trained for the worst, he still couldn't help but feel slightly betrayed.

Judging by the loss of feeling slowly creeping towards him, starting in the centers of his pain and radiating outward, however, John-117 would soon be joining his brothers and sisters. For a moment, he hoped he would see them all â€" that the ones listed as missing would be waiting for him. He could almost imagine Kelly's sad chuckle at seeing him again, or Linda's quiet nod of welcome.

Hood watched in horror as John told Cortana that his suit was malfunctioning. Cortana's voice came through the speakers. "Admiral, he's flat-lined!" she called desperately through his speakers. "He needs medical attention now!"

That broke the spell that had held the observers. The Chieftains launched themselves forward, clearly intent on taking out the new War Chieftain â€" who, even if he was medically dead, was obviously still functioning in some capacity â€" while he was injured. The ten Double Trouble team members leapt into action instantly; they beat the Chieftains back from their leader, who was still kneeling as though oblivious to the entire world. Which, Hood thought, his heart in his throat, he might be.

Louise and her camera man stared, the camera drooping slightly. They had clearly caught the whole thing on tape, but both were too pale to be a threat for now. Admiral Hood made a note in the back of his mind, absently, to commandeer their recordings and remove this fight â€" and John's subsequent collapse â€" from them.

Thel barked orders sharply to the Sangheili among the leaders. The gold-armored Elite waded into the frenzy of the Chieftains and Double Trouble. With the help of the veterans, the Brutes were quickly killed. Meanwhile, the humans ran back to their camp and the Admiral began issuing orders for everyone to pack up, and for a medical team to come as quickly as possible from the Blade above.

Thel and a few of the red-armored Elites swiftly hauled the Spartan out of the valley and then Thel quickly removed John's helmet. John's

eyes were closed, his face splattered with blood; Thel addressed the helmet and Cortana. "Cortana, is he alive?"

"No," Cortana answered. "Medically, he's not. But he's come back before. Remove his chest plate; it's crushing his chest right now. Almost every bone in his chest is broken. He can't breathe." Thel, with the help of Cortana, quickly removed said plate, setting it aside. John's chest was covered in blood, the sharp points of his ribs sticking through flesh. Thel placed his hand over his friend's chest where a human's heart was; he found nothing.

"His heart's shut down, I think," Cortana said. "It was erratic for a moment and then just stopped. Thel, you've got to get it beating again. Humans only have one heart."

"How?" Thel asked calmly.

"As gently as you possibly can, compress his ribs right above his heart. Yes, there." The Arbiter folded his hands over the Spartan's chest and pushed â€" the result was more blood until his hands were knuckle-deep in it, but he obeyed Cortana's voice and continued pumping, willing the warrior to return.

"Dammit, John, work with me!" Cortana yelled through the speakers. "Again, Arbiter." Thel adjusted his hands just as a Peliship roared overhead. John's body jerked and then Thel heart a faint thump under his fingers. He waited, holding his breath.

Eventually, after what seemed an eternity, he felt the thump again. "It is beating!" he cried triumphantly. He hadn't realized a crowd had formed; there was a collective sigh of relief from the bruised and, in one case, bloody Double Trouble troops around him.

"He needs air. You'll have to breathe for him â€" get a human in here." The ship landed and a team of white-coated medical personnel sprinted for the group of Elites clustered around a green shape on the ground. One of the humans did as Cortana ordered and fed the Spartan air, though John didn't respond.

The medical technicians took over, one of them operating a heavy lift that they chained around the Spartan, being careful to support his entire body. They quickly loaded the mostly-dead human into the Peliship. Thel accompanied them, holding the helmet and chest plate. Cortana fed information through John's armor's systems to the medical technicians, who didn't wait to get to a sterile environment. One of them quickly sliced John's chest open and inserted a tube directly into his lung. The floor was soon slippery with dark red human blood.

"Too dark," one of the doctors muttered, eyeballing the floor. "He's not getting enough oxygen."

"God dammit it, we're losing him!" a woman yelled. "Someone give him adrenaline â€" straight to the heart. Hammond, step on it!"

"Aye, aye, sir." The pilot thumbed the controls and the Peliship shot forward. "ETA, five minutes."

"He's not going to make it five seconds," the doctor muttered, trying desperately to contain the bleeding.

"Don't you dare die on me, John!" Cortana yelled through the helmet speakers.

Miraculously, John coughed, his eyes opening. He looked at Thel, holding the helmet, and a small smile tugged at his lips. "Don't you know, Cortana?" His voice was thick and bubbling. "Spartans don't die." John's eyes rolled into his head and his chest stopped moving again; the doctor yelled in frustration as his diaphragm spasmed, making John's body fight for breath.

They managed to stabilize his breathing as the ship docked. They rushed him past gaping crew members, leaving a trail of red streaks behind, into the medical ward, which was very close to the docks, a Sangheili design that probably saved the Spartan's life in the end.

Thel was left in the waiting room with the chest plate; the attending nurse took Cortana and the helmet to assist them. The entire team of doctors moved in, converging on the scraps of human they had left to work with.

Down on the planet, Admiral Hood stared up at the ship hanging above them. He wanted most to be there, pacing in the waiting room and waiting for the latest updates on the Spartan's condition. But he had duties, and fretting over John wasn't going to help anyone, including the Spartan himself.

"Get that body loaded," he barked, pointing to the War Chieftain. He turned to Xylin, who had a thick bandage wrapped around his arm where a Brute had tried to bite him during the furious and desperate struggle to contain the Chieftains after the death of their king.

"Our ship is two of your minutes away," the Elite said before Admiral Hood could speak. He was referring to the Sangheili ship waiting just out-system, fully cloaked and in stealth mode. It had been the back-up plan in case the Jiralhanae came in guns blazing; now, it would serve to transport the Elites and the dead Brutes back to the Covenant home world. "We will deliver the Jiralhanae bodies and claim leadership in the Demon's name. You and the rest of the humans should return to Earth â€" and save your Spartan."

Admiral Hood nodded. "We will destroy their ship and then leave. You have our thanks. Keep in touch."

Commander Xylin bowed his head and warbled to the Elites around him; they quickly filed towards the Brute bodies, discreetly taking the human's places as Admiral Hood barked for his troops to return to the camp.

However, a group of thirty stood apart â€" two, a representative from each of Alpha and Beta Hybrid Teams, approached Admiral Hood and Xylin. "Sirs," the Elite said hesitantly, glancing at his human counterpart. "Permission to split into our Teams. Alpha would like to accompany the Master Chief back to Earth. Beta will guard the Sangheili on their mission to the Covenant world, with your permission, sirs."

Xylin clicked his mandibles. "We have no need of guards," he said,

slightly cockily. "Both of you should go with Admiral Hood, if he agrees."

Admiral Hood nodded. "We'd be happy for the help. We're running a skeleton crew as it is, and withâ€¦ What just happenedâ€¦ I have a feeling no one is going to feel up to doing anything."

Both representatives smiled in relief, saluted, and trotted back to their troops. Immediately, the two teams split up â€" half went to pack up the camp, the other half went to secure the Brute camp.

"That leaves you with only a dozen Elites," Admiral Hood told Xylin quietly.

"Tried and true veterans. The Double Trouble troops would be distracted anyway, with the near death of their idol."

"I think we all are," Lord Hood admitted. "He must have known he was provoking the War Chieftain by turning his back on himâ€¦" The admiral shook his head.

Xylin gently put his hand on the human's shoulder, a gesture of comfort and friendship. "I believe he did," the Sangheili said quietly. Surprised, the admiral glanced at the commander. "We could all see where these talks were going â€" the Brutes were obviously buying time to rebuild their fleet. I think he thought he could either kill the War Chieftain and survive to be War Chieftain himself â€" though the Brutes would immediately have attacked him for the position â€" or kill the War Chieftain and die in the act. Both would have been protecting humanity and your allies, and is that not what the Demon was bred and trained to do?"

Lord Hood frowned thoughtfully. "If so, I'm going to have a very serious discussion about suicide with him."

Xylin shook his head slowly. "Protecting those he loves and cares for is not suicide. It is a warrior's way. You have sacrificed humans before â€" I have been on the receiving end of your sacrifices too many times to count."

The human admiral nodded slightly. "I can see your point." They were interrupted by an Elite's warble; the Brutes were stacked and the stealth ship, now docked with the Brute's ship, was sending drop ships for Xylin and his troops. The force aboard the stealth ship, named in Sangheili to render it impossible for human speech but bearing the nickname Stealthier, was sweeping through the Brute's transport and dispatching all creatures onboard.

"I had best get onboard," Admiral Hood sighed, looking to the fleet of Peliships ready to transport him back to the Blade. "Good luck, Commander."

"And to you, Admiral." Xylin moved off gracefully, ordering his troops to prepare for dust off. Admiral Hood turned to the cluster of Peliships, accompanied quickly by a pair of Double Trouble guards. He boarded the nearest Peliship just as the rest of Beta Hybrid Team returned from clearing the Brute's temporary camp.

"Nothing over there, sir," one of them reported to the admiral. The

Elite clicked his mandibles respectfully as he addressed the human. "Not even food rations â€" they were not expecting to stay long."

"Prepare yourself and your team for Slipspace. We will be jumping immediately."

"Yes, sir." The Elite saluted sharply and turned to his comrades, spreading the word as the Peliships began lifting off, heading for the _Blade_ in a silent procession. On the ride down, the soldiers had been joking and making bets on how big the War Chieftain would be â€" now, however, it was as quiet as a glassed planet.

~~_Mwahahaha~~_

18. Uneasy Crews

_Happy birthday to me, happy birthday to me, happy birthday to Cyredanthemâ€| Happy birthday to me! I'm 19 at midnight tonight.

—

Please assume I know what I'm doing here. All "mistakes" in the last chapter (and most of those before that) were intentional and vital to the plot later! If you have concerns, please let me know â€" I'm not a fanatic expert, and I may miss something. Additionally, please keep in mind that this is in the 2500s â€" the culture will have changed drastically, and I'm trying to take that into account when writing the dialogues/reactions of certain key players. I've mostly based my knowledge of Halo off of the books and Halo Nation's wiki; in the books, Spartans sustain and do a lot more damage than in the video games. That is another reason for some slight differences from what you may be used to, as pointed out by a thoughtful reviewer!

Also, thank you for all the great reviews! 10 points to the first person to find the Hunger Games reference.

****Chapter 17 â€" Uneasy Crews****

As soon as the last Peliship touched down in the loading bay and the doors slammed shut between them and the unforgiving blackness of space, atmosphere filled the area and the pilots dropped hatches. Everyone loaded out quickly, consciously avoiding the crews still scrubbing blood from the floor â€" most of it was gone, but Admiral Hood could see patches here and there being scrubbed at by frightened swabbies.

Admiral Hood double-timed it to the bridge while the civilian leaders who had come along for the talks drifted slowly back to their cabins. Most were dazed, some openly scared. The Double Trouble troops disbanded for well-deserved showers, sleep, and food, though Admiral Hood doubted any of them would be enjoying sleep for a while.

When he stepped into the bridge, the Navy personnel running the stations snapped to attention. Their eyes were haunted as well; they had probably watched the entire scene from the _Blade's_ long-range cameras.

"Alright, people. Here's the situation. Spartan-117 challenged the

War Chieftain at the end of our first talks. He won, and the War Chieftain " as well as every other Brute in this system " is dead. However, we are unsure yet as to the Master Chief's health and if he will survive. Updates will be given accordingly. Initiate Slipspace protocols. Cortana?"

"Yes, Admiral?" The AI sounded distracted.

"New Start?"

"Here, Admiral." New Start appeared on her holographic pedestal.

"You two work together. We need John to survive. Play nice."

"Yes, sir," both responded immediately. New Start continued smoothly. "I will control the ship. Cortana will dedicate 100% of her processing power to repairing the damage done."

"Excellent. Begin Slipspace preparation. Pick a random vector first and scan the ship thoroughly when we drop back out for probes. We cannot lead the Brutes to Earth."

"Answering random coordinate jump. Transitioning at minimum safe distance," New Start responded. The ship rumbled to life and broke free of her geosynchronous orbit, pulling away from the gravity well of Treaty.

"Update logs to reflect new name for this planet," Admiral Hood ordered after gazing at the retreating ball of hard dirt for a moment.

"What new name?" New Start asked curiously.

"Sacrifice."

There was a pause on the bridge. "Yes, sir," New Start said quietly. "Logs updated. Sources flagged and referenced."

"Thank you, New Start." Admiral Hood ruffled his hair and turned to his second-in-command. "Take over for now," he ordered. Until they got close to Earth, there wasn't much for the admiral to do anyway. The woman nodded and stepped into the commanding view field; gratefully, Lord Hood hurried from the bridge.

Once in the hallway, he consciously slowed his steps to an unhurried, meandering walk that took him straight to the medical wing. He passed several soldiers loitering outside in the hall " a dozen at least. Each snapped to attention when he passed, and a few exchanges words, but they were quiet and tense. The whole ship held its breath.

The admiral entered the waiting room where every available surface was covered in Marines, Navy soldiers, and Elites " they all snapped to attention except for Thel, who was still holding the Chief's blood-stained chest plate. "Admiral on deck," one of the humans snapped.

"At ease, soldiers," Lord Hood said with a wave of his hand. "Anything to report?"

"No, sir," the man who had signaled his entrance said wearily, looking at the door to the emergency wing as though he could will information through it.

"As long as you all are quiet and out of the way, you have my permission to remain so long as your duties and hygiene do not suffer," Admiral Hood said loudly enough for the hall loiterers to hear. "However, the doctors and nurses here can countermand that order at any time." The men, women, and Elites around him saluted in understanding. "Just be sure to take care of yourselves, too. This is a difficult time for all of us, but the Master Chief doesn't like to be babied and wouldn't appreciate discipline on this ship to fall apart simply because he's injured."

"Sir, yes, sir!" a few troops barked raggedly. "Understood, sir!" others responded.

Admiral Hood nodded and left, trusting that Cortana would update him as soon as the Spartan's condition changed from "nearly dead" to "slightly more alive."

Eventually, after nearly ten hours of fretting and waiting on part of the Double Trouble troops, a nurse emerged. She was almost immediately accosted by the Elites and humans, who eyed the blood stains on her uniform with unease.

"He's still in surgery," she told them hurriedly. It was obvious that she was trying to keep her cool; she was younger than most of the humans in the group, young enough not to have served in a battle. "They've stabilized him, as much as possible. He keeps fading, thoughâ€¦ It's slow going. It's going to be a few days before they're done." The nurse nodded and disappeared again.

One of the humans decided to deliver the message personally and trotted out of the room, passing along the news to anyone he passed. Faces relaxed in relief as the Spartan's condition was updated.

"Permission to enter the bridge?" Private O'Connor snapped to attention at the threshold; Admiral Hood turned and gestured for him to enter.

"At ease, Private." Lord Hood turned back to watching the viewports, waiting for the private to explain his reasons for being there.

"Sir, the Master Chief's condition has been updated. He's mostly stabilized. The medics need a few more days to piece him back together."

Admiral Hood nodded. "Thank you for notifying me, Private. Has anyone taken a break?"

Private O'Connor shook his head, running a hand through his shorn red hair. "No, sir. Only those who have duties about the ship."

"Order everyone to take a break," Admiral Hood said after a pause. "Fretting about the Chief won't bring him back any earlier. I need everyone up to par when we get back."

"Problems, sir?" The man asked hesitantly, knowing it wasn't his place but also comfortable enough with the admiral's reputation to risk a question.

"The news reporters will be all over us," Lord Hood said, glancing at the PFC. "And that pack of bloody vultures has already destroyed a fragile sense of peace for our Spartan."

"Understood, sir. We won't let anyone near him."

"Post a pair of guards outside his room, when the medics allow you to go in," Lord Hood ordered. "I trust my crew won't go in to snap a few pictures to sell to the highest bidder, but you never know."

"Right away, sir!" Private O'Connor barked, saluting. Admiral Hood returned the salute and dismissed him quickly.

Private O'Connor quickly marched his way back to the waiting room. Every single member of Double Trouble squads volunteered for guard duty; the private left it up to squad leaders to decide the shifts. He signed himself up, too, and, though it pained him, the man started the evacuation of the waiting room. After considering for a moment, he decided that a shower would be best to do first.

He quickly jogged down the silent halls and into his bunks, shared with five other Privates, hoping to steal a couple extra seconds of hot water to wash the vision of the hunk of meat that had been humanity's hero from his mind. Being one of the guards assigned to a civilian leader on this trip, he hadn't been invited down the surface â€" that was an honor reserved for the Double Trouble teams and the Spartan himself. However, he had been in the docking bay when the Master Chief had been returned, dripping blood and wheezing, chained into an lifter and attended by a fleet of medics and the Arbiter.

Private O'Connor shivered as the hot water cascaded over his skin, down his back and legs, and entered the drain below. Seeing a man many thought invincible so wrecked wasâ€| traumatic. O'Connor stared at the drain. He had been the one to suggest someone start cleaning up the blood â€" it was the first human or Sangheili blood to christen the surface of the decks. Except for the idiot corporal who had walked face-first into a Peliship and broken his nose, dripping on the decks, but that didn't count.

Private O'Connor heard the two-minute beeper and sighed, shutting off the water before it automatically turned icy cold. He stepped out of the small cubicle, wrapped a towel around his waist after tousling it through his hair, and went to his bunk. None of his roommates were in the room, making it seem much bigger than it should be. He quickly dressed in a set of fatigues, tucked his tags beneath his shirt, and lay down for a few hours' sleep.

_~Back on the bridge of the _Blade

"Admiral, is this a good time?" Cortana's voice broke through Terrence's silent musings. He turned to the console where she appeared, shimmering in a pale blue-purple.

"Of course, Cortana. You have my undivided attention."

"May weâ€¦ speak in private, sir?" The AI pushed her holographic hair from her avatar's face.

The humans on the bridge blinked. It was very rare for Cortana to be hesitant about anything. Lord Hood cleared his throat, indicated for his next-in-command to take over, and headed for his quarters, walking quickly.

Once inside the rather spacious area, he sat at his clutter-free desk and keyed the holopad. Cortana immediately came to life, slightly smaller than usual but big enough to project worry in her avatar's expression and posture.

"What is it?" the human asked.

"It's John, sir." Terrence sat up a little straighter, already steeling himself for bad news when Cortana shook her head slightly at the obvious concern on his face. "He's not taken a turn for the worse, sir. I mean that the damage he sustained was far greater than he should have. I have several concerns, really."

"Go on," Admiral Hood said slowly.

"The War Chieftain was huge for a Brute, but even then, he clearly wasn't very bright. To get to the top of a chain of very crafty old Chieftains, he'd've had to have been very good at fighting. But we didn't see anything advanced; nothing sly or cunning or even above basic barbarism. It was all raw, like a kid throwing his first punch. He was young, and maybe he could have been a Chieftain on nothing but brawn, but even Brutes have some brains, usually. Our friend was also a supreme fanatic, more so than I've seen in a long time, since Thel exposed the truth of the Halos."

Admiral Hood frowned. "What are you telling me, Cortana?"

"I think that the War Chieftain wasâ€¦ different. Somehow. Maybe a fluke of genetics, but something was off about him. I wish we had a sample of his tissues to testâ€¦" Cortana mused, the blue code symbols racing down her body.

"Do any of the doctors have ideas?"

The AI shook her head. "We're still patching John back upâ€¦ Most of my processing power is devoted to the medical wing. But I keep watching the long-range camera's tapes andâ€¦ something just doesn't fit. John's faced Brutes before, nearly as big, and not been so beat up."

"Could it be a result of slowed reflexes? He's been out of the fight for almost a year."

"No. Yes, he was a little slow at first, but his body can't forget thirty years of warfare, admiral. He was at peak condition, too, even at his age. Andâ€¦" Cortana stopped and peered off into thin air for a moment, then turned to the admiral. "One of the nurses located a tooth in John's armor. I'm going to process itâ€¦ Maybe it will hold the key to this mystery."

Terrence nodded. "Let me know the minute you find anything," he ordered.

"Aye, aye, sir," Cortana replied, already preoccupied. The admiral turned off the holopad and hit the intercom. "Louise, please report to the admiral's quarters," he intoned over the ship's PA system. Cortana's comment about the long range cameras had made Terrence remember that he hadn't taken the reporter's tapes of the event.

He waiting, twiddling his thumbs as he examined his own memories â€" fresh and sharp with the fear that had coursed through him like a green swabbie â€" of the event. The Brute was bigger than any he'd seen before â€" at least three meters tall. Now that he thought about it, the alien had borne no markers of having fought before. The ritual fights that a Brute endured to gain War Chieftain status left marks. Tartarus had been scarred heavily, but this new War Chieftain hadn't been scratched, that the admiral remembered.

He filed the thought away for Cortana as the bell rang and he buzzed the young woman standing outside into his meeting room. "Have a seat," he said courteously. She sat down quickly, folding her right leg over her left in a very proper fashion.

"Lord Hood." The reporter's omission of his rank was surely purposeful, but the man didn't let it bother him.

"Ma'am," the admiral replied calmly. "Under ONI's top-secret protocol, I must seize all of the videos you have taken since we touched down on Treaty."

The reporter didn't cry out; she had clearly been expecting this. "Of course," she murmured. "But the Public Information Act-

"Has been overridden in court many times when technology, weapons, classified secrets, or other information is so vital to our cause that wide-spread knowledge of it could damage and/or destroy our efforts."

"Admit it â€" you don't want the world to know that your precious Spartan is vulnerable." Louise was clearly switching tactics, trying to bully Terrence into backing down, but the man would have none of it.

"You have one hour to bring me your memory disks and submit all personal computers, data centers, and other memory banks to a thorough investigation by Cortana."

"That's an invasion of my privacy!" Louise sputtered. "I am entitled to keep my personal files private, and my interviews include information that the AI's conflict of interests may not want spread."

"You can have New Start do it, if you like. Though Cortana would never allow her ethics routine to be subverted, New Start has no preconceived notions of John, me, or you."

"It's still an invasion of my privacy. I have financial information, family lettersâ€"|"

"A military-grade smart AI wouldn't steal your bank code," Admiral Hood reminded her, snorting. "You agreed to these terms when you came on board my ship."

"My producer will have words with you!" Louise snarled as she stood and stomped out of the room. The admiral shook his head as she tried to slam the door behind her for effect " it was a pneumatic door and just hissed closed a little faster, resisting her attempts to pull it shut.

~Back in the medical wing~

Blood-stained Spartan armor was stacked in an unused room. The next room over was a flurry of controlled chaos surrounding what looked to be a man, though he was so bloody and disfigured that it was difficult to tell. Tubes went in and came out, pumping vital fluids and carrying out blood to be cleaned and re-inserted. Doctors labored with lasers, cutting more wounds into the Spartan. The organ cloning device was at work making clones of every organ in the human chest and stomach, from lungs to reproductive tract and everything between. Another device was replicating human muscles and other tissues. Cortana oversaw everything, keeping track of the doctors as well to ensure no one was overly tired in the rush to heal the Spartan.

~Another part of Cortana's mind~

Cortana was using the medical bay's instruments to repair her friend, watching the doctors for any signs of fatigue or other problems, coursing through the reporter's personal data banks and memory chips with a piggy-back on New Start's own check, and observing the crew to ensure no one was hiding illness or mental troubles due to the recent events.

_ANOMALY FOUND. _

Cortana allowed the alert to penetrate the stream of information she was currently processing and sent part of her mind to observe the anomaly.

The information streamed into her processors.

What is this? she wondered, staring at the charts. Her emotional routine processed a feeling of speculation " and then fear.

_No" No, this can't be" I must have made a mistake. Maybe John's blood tainted the sample. _She set the process to detecting any foreign taint " but other than the paint and chips from the armor that had become embedded in the tooth's outer layer, there was no evidence that Spartan blood had mixed with the Brute's tooth.

Cortana quickly opened a comm link to Admiral Hood, who was just waking from a well-deserved but fitful nap.

"Yes, Cortana?" the admiral asked, shaking the sleep from his eyes.

"Sir, you had better see this. I'm sending the files to your computer now." By the time her synthesized voice had said it, the files were already waiting on his desk's computer screen. The man sat somewhat ungracefully in his chair and peered at them.

"Well, they look like DNA chartsâ€¦ But I never took advanced bio, Cortana. What am I looking at here?"

"If my theory is correctâ€¦ An augmented Brute."

Admiral Hood went slightly pale and silent; he stared at the charts filled with numbers, reference links, and names of things he couldn't even pronounce. It differed from human genes greatly, in both shape and composition, but the general idea as it had been explained to him was the same. It was the genetic blueprint for a Brute.

"Anâ€¦ Augmented Brute, you said?"

Cortana's hologram appeared on the holopad; she nodded grimly. "I'm afraid so, Admiral. Our knowledge of the Brutes' genetics is shaky at best, but this one's genetics bear a striking resemblance to what was done to the Spartans, but in genetic form. We don't have the technology or knowledge to do that. Not to mention that it would literally have to be done as an embryo, basicallyâ€¦"

"Could it be a fluke?"

"The odds are not in favor of it."

"The odds are never in our favor," the man growled, leaning back in his chair. "Send this information to the ONI people back on Earth. It's classified above top-secret."

"Of course, sir. Developing personal encryption; only two people will be able to see this information once I send it. They can distribute it accordingly."

"Good. Any update on John's condition?"

The AI shook her head. "No, sir."

"How could there be an augmented Brute?" Admiral Hood mused to himself, tapping his fingers on the desk in a nervous habit he thought long broken. Once he was aware of it, he immediately put his hand stiffly in his lap.

"It's possible that the Engineers have allied themselves with the Brutes and haven't told anyoneâ€¦ But they deal in machines and programs, not bioengineering. The only beings we've encountered with this sort of proficiency in advanced biogenetic mutations are Forerunners. And if there's one of these augmented Brutes, there are surely more of them."

"Could the Brute have been sent to wipe out John specifically?"

Cortana frowned. "If so, sir, that's a troubling thought â€" that something or someone wants John gone so badly they'll risk unleashing a brutal creature like a Brute with several times its normal strength?"

"What kind of augmentations are we looking at? And could we replicate it?"

"No, sir, we couldn't. This isn't just genetic manipulation â€" see,

here?" One of the charts lit up and several sequences pulsed, calling the man's attention. "These look like they'd secret a sort of armor over the host's bonesâ€¦ Like John's bone grafts, but biological in origin and composition. We simply don't know enough to even guess what is hidden in these codes. We'd need a few hundred hours of study and dissections just to catalog the Brute's DNA fully. To understand all of these changes would take a lifetime of study."

"By what we saw, though, we know the Brute was very strong."

"At least twice normal strength, sir. We also know he had augmented bones â€" I can read that much in this mess, and John should have snapped his back several times during the fight. His intelligence may not have developed as fullyâ€¦ Which would explain the raw fighting style and the less-than-average vocabulary. Brutes are usually a lot more colorful. I blamed it on the translator at first butâ€¦ It would make sense. If something can do this, they wouldn't want these biomachines to think for themselves. Whoever "they" are."

"That's a terrifying thought, Cortana," Admiral Hood admitted. "Do you think there could be more?"

"It's a purely biological processâ€¦ Even if they sped up the Brute's growth time â€" he did act slightly immature â€" it would take around six years, I would think, to get another War Chieftain like that. But I'm guessing here â€" whoever did this could be capable of producing adults within a matter of weeks."

Admiral Hood frowned. "The War Chieftain mentioned something about killing many Demons â€" but we would have noticed a Brute that big, wouldn't we?"

The AI's symbols halted and then sped up. "Yes, we would haveâ€¦ Unless the Brute was genetically modified as an adult."

"Can you do that?"

"By our knowledge of scienceâ€¦ No."

Admiral Hood rubbed a hand over his face. "The Engineers haven't decided which side to support, last I heard. Maybe Thel has had news from his party. Please ask him to join us."

"He's on his way, sir," Cortana reported after a moment. They waited in silence, the man staring intently at the charts as though they would divulge their secret if he intimidated them long enough. When the Sangheili arrived, Hood offered him a seat â€" it molded to conform itself to the Arbiter â€" and Cortana summarized their findings so far.

"If what you say is correct, Cortana, when we are in grave danger," Thel rumbled thoughtfully. "While the Jiralhanae are generally difficult opponents to begin with, an augmented one would be a mighty fighter. And, as you say, the War Chieftain was not as mature and intelligent as previous ones. It takes great skill and cunning to defeat all of the Chieftains in trial combat."

"Have you had word from your delegation to the Engineers?"

Thel shook his head. "Their leaders are still deliberating. My people

have not always been kind to them, it is true, during the time of the Covenant, and they wish protection and unlimited access to both human and Sangheili technology. They have intimate knowledge of our technology already, having built it, but your delegation to their planet balks at allowing them the same."

"The Engineers are imitative; if they defect to the Brutes, whatever knowledge they've gained from our improvements on your tech could become theirs," Admiral Hood pointed out. Thel nodded.

"This is true. However, so long as they are provided with knowledge and things to fix, they are content. And if we provide protection, peace, and broken ships, they will be blissful."

"Do you know of anything that could do this sort of thing?" Hood asked, waving to the charts on the hologram.

The Arbiter shook his head gracefully, unconsciously imitating the human gesture. "Only the Forerunners, I would think. And if they have allied themselves with the Jiralhanae, we will not survive a war between our peoples."

"Not to mention, your soldiers wouldn't like to fight their gods, eh?" Hood added sourly. "Alright, thank you, Thel."

The Sangheili stood, and then paused and glanced back. "I know it is forward of me. But Sanghelios is closer to our location than your Earth is. We have more advanced medical technology there."

The admiral lifted his eyebrow. "I thought Sanghelios's location was supposed to be kept a secret from humans."

"By all technicalities, the Demon is a Sangheili warrior. He underwent the full naming ceremony while en route from the Dawn." The admiral blinked at this; John hadn't said anything about that. "And lacking a ship of my own, it would be proper if I were to authorize the Blade as a Sangheili ally ship and lead you to safety, at least for the Spartan."

Lord Hood glanced at Cortana. "It's true, sir. Sanghelios is a mere three days' journey. Earth is yet another seven."

"You would have to drop out of Slipspace just outside of the system; we would transfer the Demon to one of our medical ships and take him down to Sanghelios, and you would be free to return home."

"It would look very badly if we didn't come back with John," Admiral Hood muttered. "Cortana, your assessment?"

"Honestly, the next few hours are the most vital. If he survives the next twenty-four hours or so, three or seven days won't make a difference. He'll be comatose and won't even notice the time passing. And if he doesn't. They still won't," she finished quietly. "If word is leaked that he is on Sanghelios, people are going to wonder why. And if we're late to return, rumors are going to fly."

Hood ground his teeth. "Then thank you, Thel, but we'll have to decline."

The Arbiter bowed his head gracefully. "I fully understand," he rumbled. "Good day to you both." He clicked his mandibles gently and left, ducking slightly through the doorway.

"I had no idea we were so close," Hood mumbled. Cortana took this as a cue to leave the admiral to his thoughts. Her hologram faded and she focused that portion of her mind on yet another task.

~Medical Bay~

The first shift of doctors was rotated out to eat, sleep, and prepare themselves for another round. They had managed to stabilize the giant man, feeding him oxygen, pain killers, nutrients, and anti-infection drugs. Carefully, a pair of doctors had cut a piece of the Spartan's skull out to allow his bruised brain to swell without causing damage.

The second shift worked on the Spartan's organs, the organ cloner having spit out a whole new digestive tract. They replaced the lacerated stomach and intestines, and then finally replaced the man's heart quickly, which had been punctured sometime between the beginning of the fight and getting into the surgical room. Cortana controlled the precision instruments, cutting, cauterizing, and sewing with complete concentration.

The third shift began carefully grafting new muscle to the shredded remains of old, reattaching tendons, ligaments, and nerves. They pieced together the Spartan's shoulder carefully, using quite a bit of fake bone to replace the bits too small to screw back together.

The fourth shift, all of the doctors from the first shift and a few extras, relieved the exhausted crew and began to work on the Spartan's head. They repaired his miraculously unbroken face, merely replacing a couple of teeth and sewing up a hole in his tongue where he had bit himself. Additionally, they pieced together the Spartan's skin, grafting new pieces on wherever it was necessary but avoiding the human's chest for now.

They then returned to his chest, replacing his lungs and then carefully rebuilding his rib cage around it. They enforced the structure with a lattice that would hold it up, since his ribs weren't ready to hold up themselves. It was experimental but they knew it was the only thing that would save the Spartan's life if he lived through the next few weeks of hell.

Finally, after nearly five straight days of surgeries and heart-stopping moments when the Spartan's breath faltered, the doctors all gathered in the waiting room to deliver the news to the Arbiter and Admiral.

"We don't know if he'll live," the head doctor told the men quietly. "We've repaired everything we can. All we can do now is wait. It's up to him and his body."

They were well on their way back to Earth, a mere three days out. The group of Sangheili representatives who went to the Brute home world with the bodies of the War Chieftain and Chieftains and claimed leadership in John's name had reported back that their mission had been moderately successful. They had ended up starting a civil war,

turning the Brutes on each other in light of the lack of a Jiralhanae War Chieftain. It would distract the bloody civilization for the precious weeks it would take to assemble the fleets of human and Sangheili ships.

John was moved into the ICU aboard the Blade two days after the end of his surgeries, prepared for a quick transport to an Earth-based hospital. He remained in a medically-induced coma, his injuries too extensive for him to breathe on his own. Admiral Hood ran the ship carefully, scared for the life of his friend. The Arbiter helped the Admiral in a truly new bond of friendship, both keeping the crews from believing that the Spartan was dead. Cortana made hourly updates to the Admiral which remained the same throughout the last day of Slipspace travel: "Sierra-117 still in danger. Heart beats regularly; unable to sustain breath without medical equipment. Currently in medically-induced coma. Recommend more rest."

When they reached the Sol system, the Admiral immediately issued orders for John to be transported to the best hospital on the world, which happened to be in Denver. The Blade docked with the giant rotating space station. Everyone assembled on the deck as the medical technicians "helped with a heavy-lifting stretcher that propelled itself" moved the Spartan from the medical bay into a waiting transport vehicle, specially built to not jostle the occupants. Every man, woman, and Sangheili in the deck saluted solemnly as the Spartan was rolled out of the ship, a much different ceremony than when he had come onboard for the first time. Machines breathed for him, and tubes entered and left his body in various places, but it rallied the personnel to see that their hero was at least semi-alive.

They transported the Spartan secretly, Admiral Hood refusing to comment to the press about what happened, before announcing their return officially. A stealth ship and the judicious use of timing allowed the medical team to roll the Spartan directly from the ship into an elevator and then down to the ICU unit. The hospital agreed to strict confidentiality terms, in return for a hefty sum from the UNSC, and cleared a set of rooms for the Spartan. Though he was comatose, John had an entire squadron of doctors and nurses attending him 24/7. Once the Spartan was in place, Admiral Hood called an assembly of all of the troops and crew aboard the Blade.

"You all know what's happened, and the consequences. At this moment, the Master Chief is expected to make a full recovery. The last thing he needs, however, is stress. So we all have to do our part to help him heal, and that is to keep our mouths shut. The official report will be broadcast tonight on every news station. If you were on the ground, the talks went as expected, with no headway. If you were in the ship, nothing of importance happened. Understood?" Admiral Hood gazed out over the assembly "nearly three hundred men, women, and Sangheili warriors, all male. Unlike his previous years of combat, the Chief had made efforts on the week-long ride out to interact with the other soldiers, which would only work to his advantage now.

"Sir, yes, sir!" the assembly roared, coming to attention and saluting.

"Dismissed." Admiral Hood came down off his podium and quickly exited; he had a press conference in five minutes. Thel was waiting when he stepped off the transport that brought him to the large

floating station where it would be held, due to the unexpectedly swift return of the Blade.

Lord Hood was introduced by one of ONI's PR guys; he came to the podium amidst a silent sea of reporters. Squaring his shoulders and mentally reciting his favorite psalm, he carefully crafted the lie that 'Vadam and some of the other leaders had helped him create.

"We arrived on Treaty first, and established a camp for the duration of the talks," he began quickly. "Once the Jiralhanae arrived, they sent half a dozen delegates to the planet to treat with us. Our first meeting was our last. They refused to consider any sort of mutually-beneficial peace or even a declaration of neutrality between our peoples. Their War Chieftain, their highest rank of leader, was very insistent that his religion demands all lesser beings be sacrificed on the path. They offered to take the Sangheili back on the condition that, once their Way was open, they would remain behind.

"The hybrid teams, Alpha and Beta, showed themselves to excellent standing. Under the guidance and leadership of Master Chief Sierra-117, they proved themselves aptly able to handle any disturbance at the table. Their services were unnecessary, however, as the talks proved fruitless and the Jiralhanae left at the end of the first session."

He spoke at length about the supposed considerations he and the other leaders had put forth regarding planet ownership, trade agreements, and other treaty topics. Then he allowed Thel to speak for his people; he affirmed that, despite the bad relations between humans and Jiralhanae, the Sangheili would remain allied with the humans, as would the Unggoy.

After he was finished, he stepped back and allowed the reporters to ask their question. One stood quickly, her deep voice covering her competitors' neatly. "Sirs, where is the Spartan? No reports show him exiting the ship, or entering his home, yet all of the crews and troops have been given shore leave."

Admiral Hood had anticipated this and stepped forward. "Sierra-117 is currently on a top-secret mission. Due to the sensitive nature of said mission, no more questions regarding him, his whereabouts, or his current actions will be answered."

"What planets does humanity own?" another asked. "Did the Brutes agree to any reparation for the millions butchered?"

Thel answered this one. "All planets that belonged to humanity before the war, and any captured since then, have been recognized by the Sangheili as human property. The Jiralhanae will neither recognize your property nor ours, however."

"Are the Brutes building a fleet?" another reporter asked loudly, which sent up a series of mutters.

"The Huragok, Engineers, are not currently allied with the Jiralhanae, so if they are, the progress will be slow and brutish," Admiral Hood answered loudly. "We are currently negotiating the inclusion of the Huragok as our allies, in the hopes that they will be able to provide insights into possible improvements for our

Navy."

A few more questions were asked, mostly on possible trade agreements between the Sangheili and humans or the formation of a Sangheili-human government or resource body, which would oversee said agreements. The admiral could feel the effects of deep-space travel catching up to him as the conference wore on and, finally, called a halt, directing all further questions towards the startled PR officer. By the slight relaxation in Thel's shoulders as the pair left the hall, Terrence knew the move had been a prudent one.

Lord Hood took a private Pelican ride into the mountains once the press conference was over. He touched down in the pasture behind Rebecca's house. She came out of the large barn when she heard the Pelican, a large black dog bounding after her, clearly expecting John to appear. But when Admiral Hood approached her, Rebecca stopped in her tracks and stared at him. Hood took off his cap and Rebecca had to hold herself firmly to keep from fleeing.

He was quick to assure her that John was alive, though it was still unsure whether he would make it through the healing still to be done. She demanded to be taken to him; she called her brother, leaving instructions for him to take care of her affairs, and joined the Admiral in his Pelican within a few minutes.

19. Baby Steps, Mister

_Please note: the similarity between this story and Razzika's "My Neighbor is a Spartan" has been brought to my attention. Razz's story is whole levels of awesomeness above mine! I have had this idea since I started reading the Halo books a couple years ago. But I never wrote it down and published it here because I was fully in the TMNT-fiction universe. Seeing the reception Razz's story got (and deserves; if you haven't read it, do so NOW) made me willing to put this forth. I spoke with Razz before publishing and she has no problem with it; my story is going in a complete different direction, and it's not a romance (I can't write romance for crap). _

Please leave a review if you read! I love getting comments, even ones so simple as "awesome chapter" or "here's what you could do to improveâ€¦" â€" they motivate me to write more! Also, I had 200,000 words total on this story (and about 100,000 are published here), but it took a different turn than I wanted it to, so I scrapped the last half and will be rewriting it! So updates may be a little slower than normal, everyone. I apologize in advanceâ€¦ But hopefully it will lead to more reviewing! (hint hint)

And, yes, this is going to head into slightly different territory nowâ€¦ But never fear! I should also reiterate that this is going to contain MANY AU elements. So please don't be alarmed.

****Chapter 18 - Baby Steps, Mister****

~In a [planet] far, far away~

"All goes according to plan," a being hissed, clicking its claws on the tile floor. It stood on two legs, thin and lean; its arms were long-fingered and triple-jointed. The faint light in the cave surrounding it was barely enough to see the wall through the

creature's chest; its transparency was a result of both time and decaying holographic systems, despite efforts to reduce them.

"Your first little pet was a disaster," another responded, yellow reptilian eyes glaring at the smaller creature. The first speaker frowned, glowering.

"A play worth the risk," he said after a moment. He reached out and carefully tapped a diagram on the holoscreen in front of the trio. "We know the capabilities of this "Demon" to be far overstated."

"But he is not dead," another muttered, drawing up the specifications of the so-called "MJOLNIR" armor. "Their technology is improving with every turet we leave them to imitate and improve upon the Covenant technologies."

"Athera," the first speaker sighed. "He will be dead soon. If not from the injuries, he will return with the humans â€" and then we may do with him as we please. The humans cannot continue improving their technology for long â€" they have yet to discover how to create hard light, and that is the most basic of our capabilities."

The being called Athera stepped further into the light, tossing her head proudly. "Clearly, my plan would have been superior to yours, Lanut." She sat down daintily, her hologram perching on it as though there was truly a chair in the room.

Lanut sneered, tapping his claws on the table. He out-processed her significantly, but she seemed not to remember the trouncing he had delivered the last time she thus spoke out against him. "Our creators left me in charge," he reminded her savagely. She was infuriating, born from the mind of Lanut's creator's rival. But he had no choice; she was a brilliant tactician, to be sure, and one of the only capable beings left in the colony.

"They left your _creator_ in charge, Lanut," the yellow-eyed creature reminded him carefully. "It is because you are a clone of his processing plant that you are in charge now."

"Enough, Rien! If you want to be leader, challenge me!" Lanut snarled, thumping his fist against the table.

"Oh, I could never," Rien answered softly. Though he could out-process Lanut, he was much younger, and he preferred reading and studying under the tutelage of the older clones to fighting or planning such events as cataclysmic war. But Lanut knew he needed a strong-minded general and had chosen his creator's best friend and most stalwart ally.

Athera snorted at the hot-head, selecting another diagram â€" this one of the Spartan's organic structure â€" as she contemplated the news they had received. Lanut's Kargian hadn't so much as left the growth tank before it was clear the experiment had been a failure. Incredibly thick, both in mind and muscle, the creature hadn't been much use as intended. Instead of destroying it and beginning anew, however, Lanut had chosen to send it with the delegation to the planet Nosos, called Treaty by the humans, inserting him en route to replace the War Chieftain already on board. It had been done relatively quietly, much to her surprise, but once the Kargian had

arrived at the planet, things had started turning ugly quickly.

First, there had been a new player on the field â€" the Demon so feared by the ridiculous Doutahlîi and so respected by the proud Jouranat. When news of their alliance with the humans had reached the council's ears, accusations had flown. Though Athera detested the little methane-sucking runts, Doutahlîi served admirably as cannon fodder, and they bred with impressive enthusiasm to fulfill that need in the old Covenant.

The more touchy Jouranat were a worse loss â€" the generals and leaders of the former Covenant, their knowledge of both war tactics and her creators' technology was extensive. The humans had shown an incredible ability for imitating that technology â€" even improving upon it. It rankled her to see them so easily destroy their carefully-laid plans.

The one Jourana that had led the revolt â€" ranked an Arbiter and with the name of "Thel 'Vadam" â€" especially irritated the council. His knowledge of the true purpose of the rings was extensive, and mostly accurate, and had served to sever the ties between the Jouranat and their betters. Lanut had already established that he wanted to destroy the Arbiter himself, though it was unlikely he would get the chance, given that the humans and Jouranat would have to defeat every Kargian between them first. Even then, their creators had left strict orders when they had ascended â€" they weren't to meddle directly. They could only alter the course of time indirectly. It was a damnable slow process that tested even Rien's patience.

She wondered what it had been like, in the days of her creator's ancestors. They had ruled planets, systems â€" entire galaxy arms. In the time since her forefathers had abandoned their post at the Mantle, however, her creator's kind had slowly been dying off â€" boredom and listlessness led to deep sleeps. It was why she, Lanut, and Rien were basically in charge now â€" the older ones were mired in their memories of better times, dead from willfully entering the heat of a star, or processors too old and damaged to be recloned.

That task was vital to the survival of all sentient creatures in the universe; protect their heritage, activate the Rings, and remove the vile humans from the universe. Those humans had brought forth the most terrible of plagues, and then, instead of dying sensibly for their mistake, had brought it to the center of civilization, wiping out countless millennia of advancement.

Athera's predecessors had, however, severely blurred the lines when attempting to create a religion that simultaneously worshipped their owners and mentioned the Rings. In the translations then made by the power-hungry Mapahu, the original purpose of the Covenant was truly lost. It was up to Athera, Lanut, and Rien to set the Kargians back on the true path, now that the Mapahu were out of the picture, mostly slain by the humans or Jouranat. It was a daunting task, especially since the Kargians were solely creatures of war and battle, and difficult to control from a distance through puppets of the same inclination. It was a puzzle that both intrigued and frustrated Athera.

~Back on Earth~

Rebecca twisted her hair between two fingers, tense. The Admiral flew the Pelican silently; the civilian woman was strapped into a seat near the hatch, ready to jump out when they landed. Hood touched down gently on the Pelican field just west of the hospital and led her into John's room. They passed the guards posted at the beginning of the hallway and just in front of the door, one Elite and one human at each post, there to keep unauthorized personnel, especially those who would be willing to take a few pictures of the Spartan for cash, away from this corridor.

Rebecca gasped softly as she saw the machines hooked up to the Spartan. She rushed forward and grabbed his hand gently, aware that the doctors had told her to be very careful about touching him. "John," she said softly.

"He's in a medically-induced coma, ma'am," a nurse said gently. "If all goes well, we'll take him off the medications in a week." Rebecca nodded numbly, sinking into a chair; Admiral Hood took his leave reluctantly.

Somehow, the news got out and reporters flocked to the hospital. Rebecca was left in peace for the day she spent at the Spartan's side, before she had to return to her house. She arranged her affairs and then returned to the hospital with a framed picture of John and Rebecca laughing during a snowball fight, which Luke had attended with a camera. Rebecca set it on the table next to John's bed.

Nurses brought Rebecca food and updated her whenever there was new information from the machines whirring, beeping, and humming around the comatose man. When the week was up, almost ceremoniously, a doctor detached a machine from John, pulling the tube from his arm carefully. He explained to Rebecca that it would probably take a day or two for the medication's effects to wear off, and then John would wake slowly. He warned her that he might have brain damage, and could quite possibly not remember her. Rebecca was willing to risk it and stayed by his side.

Luke visited again and insisted that she take a shower. She finally relented after he pointed out that John's sense of smell was much more sophisticated than theirs, and he might not want a face-full of sweaty-woman smell when he woke.

A day after the medically-induced coma was ended, Rebecca was watching John when he suddenly groaned softly. Rebecca leaned forward instantly. "John," she called softly, pressing the nurse button. "John, can you hear me?"

John's eyes opened a crack and his lips moved slightly, his throat contracting as he swallowed. "John, take it easy. You're in the hospital." John's eyes opened a little further, squinting in the light. A nurse appeared in the doorway and, upon seeing her patient's eyes open, moved over to the bedside quickly.

"Master Chief, can you hear me?" she asked gently, waving her hand in front of John's face. John's eyes tracked her hand slowly; he nodded slightly. The nurse breathed a sigh of relief. "Excellent. Don't try to speak yet. You were injured terribly in a duel with a Brute. You've been put back together, but your body needs time to heal. It's

been almost three weeks since that incident. You were in a medically-induced coma for about two weeks. You may be confused and disoriented. You're among friends here; don't worry. Sleep, rest."

John obediently closed his eyes. He hadn't even looked at Rebecca. The nurse hugged her gently, murmuring, "It's okay, sweetie. He's confused. He needs a few hours to sleep off the drugs in a natural state. He'll be right as rain in a few days. Well, mentally."

"What ifâ€¦| What if all he remembers is the war?" Rebecca asked, lost.

"Then you'll have to teach him again," the nurse said firmly. She had been one of the nurses assigned permanently to John's case, and had spent hours with Rebecca, talking and sharing stories of their lives â€" especially Rebecca's, after John entered it.

Rebecca sighed, taking John's hand again and squeezing it every so lightly. The nurse left her to deliver the news of the patient's first awakening to the doctor currently on call. He stepped in to check on John's vitals and told Rebecca that he was already getting stronger, and would probably be able to breathe on his own within a few days.

John woke up again while Rebecca was asleep. He looked around him. Something was wrong with his eyes; everything looked dark. He carefully rubbed at them, and the scene around him lightened a bit. He glanced down, surprised to find a mass of brown hair framing a sleeping woman's face lying by his thigh. John frowned slightly; this woman's face tugged at his memory, like a forgotten dream.

John groaned softly as he moved his head. The woman woke instantly, sitting up suddenly. She brushed her hair out of her face and gasped when she saw him looking at her. She smiled and took his hand in hers. "John, you're awake."

John frowned slightly. "Yes, ma'am," he said courteously, wondering how this woman knew his name. Unless Dr. Halsey had had a face transplant, this woman was completely unknown to him. He missed the pain in her eyes as he gently took his hand out of hers. He noticed the pale ring of flesh on her finger â€" it tugged at his memory. Maybe he had met her before, John thought to himself. The ring was special, he knew, but he didn't know why. He dismissed the puzzle quickly.

"Where am I?" he asked, mentally checking over his body. He felt like he had been rearranged; everything throbbed with a dull ache to match the pain behind his eyes. He could see the many machines hooked up to him, including one that was clearly breathing for him. The Spartan tried to inhale carefully â€" his entire chest immediately protested and he subsided, allowing the machine to feed him air instead.

"Denver. On Earth," the woman said quietly, tears in her eyes.

"Are you alright?" he asked carefully. He wasn't used to women crying in his presence; he had seen soldiers cry in pain, but this woman didn't seem to be riddled with plasma burns or needler punctures.

"John, don't you remember me?" she asked quietly. "I'm Rebecca."

John thought hard, but his head pounded. He shook his head carefully, wincing as the throbbing headache attacked again. "No, ma'am. Do you have a rank?"

Rebecca shook her head, a tear slipping down her cheek. John had the nagging feeling that he was causing her to cry, which was ludicrous â€" he wasn't doing anything to this strange woman. "Noâ€" she said quietly, sighing. "John, what's the last thing you remember?"

John frowned, drawing his eyebrows together. "The Forward Unto Dawn." He suddenly looked around. "Cortana put me into cryo sleep. Where is she?"

"Cortana's fine." Rebecca bit her lip. "John, you're going to need to stay calm, okay?" The big man nodded; he was trained to be calm. "You're missing almost a year of memory. It's June thirtieth, 2555." He blinked, but accepted it. The instant he heard it, something in his mind clicked into place. "The Arbiter â€" Thel â€" saved you from the Dawn and brought you back to Earth. You retired from the UNSC, since the war is over. You gave up your Spartan life to live anonymously. But you were ousted during a ceremony for the other Spartans; someone recognized you and spread the word. You're my neighbor; we live in Yuray, in the Rocky Mountains. You have a beautiful house. I have three horses â€" Miss Valentine, Lover Boy, and Red Rose. Miss V and Lover Boy had a filly â€" her name is Miss Boy. You helped me deliver the filly. I have a dog, too, named Chichi. She's a big Newfie."

John blinked at her. "I don'tâ€" Remember any of that." He would never leave the UNSC â€" it was his family. It held the last ties to his Spartans â€" the UNSC was the only way he could find his missing siblings.

Rebecca nodded, her voice choked with tears as she answered. "You went back into the UNSC for a short trip. You were supposed to be head of security for a treaty meeting between the Brutes and us and the Elites. But the War Chieftain attacked you. You killed him, but he nearly killed you in the process. You're now leader of the Brutes, I think."

John nodded slightly. "Judging by the damage, I'm guessing I was under for a long time."

"You were resuscitated many times," Rebecca confirmed. "We were worried you would have amnesia."

"Apparently, I do." John didn't seem to be worried, and Rebecca bit her lip. "I will work on repairing my memory, miss. You should return to your home. I'm sure your animals require your attention. I will survive."

Rebecca grabbed John's hand; he glanced at her and then at his hand, frowning in puzzlement. "You said you'd come back," the woman said harshly, wiping tears from her cheeks. "You promised me. Three weeks, and you'd be home. And we could get back to drinking hot chocolate and romping in the snow."

"I always keep my promises," he murmured, staring deep into her eyes. They were the deep blue of a sky just before dusk, surrounded by tanned skin that bespoke hard work and strength in the smallish woman underneath it. Few people could keep up a staring contest with a Spartan â€" his enlarged pupils generally threw them off.

Rebecca, for her part, locked eyes with her friend. Their hazel depths were calm, probably because of the morphine and his Spartan training. They shifted slightly, clearly peering at her in a new light.

Suddenly, there was an instant change; John shook his head ever so slightly and gently pulled Rebecca into a hug. He held her close to him, murmuring softly. "I'm so sorry," he breathed. Rebecca pressed her head gently into his chest, aware of the extensive repairs beneath the hospital gown. John didn't seem to notice. "I can't believe I forgot that." He released her and she moved back, sitting up and tossing her head to keep her hair from her face.

Rebecca smiled slightly. "But you remember," she said, locking eyes with him. "That's all that matters now. You won't forget again."

John smiled, a truly radiant grin that reminded Rebecca of better times. "I won't be moving for a while, I think." He frowned down at his body. "I can't really feel anything."

"You're on enough morphine to knock out a small army," Rebecca told him with a small giggle.

"Must be why I feel a little loopy," John muttered.

"Must be," Rebecca agreed. "You should go back to sleep. You need to heal. I'll be here when you wake."

John's lips tugged into small smile. "Yes, ma'am," he murmured playfully, closing his eyes. Rebecca smiled, picking up her book from the side table and returning to it, though her mind was not thinking of the characters and trouble of this fictional tale. She had much more real problems â€" and successes â€" to worry about.

~~In an undisclosed location~~

"What about my pay?" the nurse asked timidly, clutching her purse.

"We'll pay you if we deem the content worth it," the other woman told her sternly, holding out an impatient hand. "Hand over the disk."

The nurse carefully dug into her purse and gave the taller woman the small data disk. "It's all there. Reports and everything."

"Excellent," the reporter purred, her green eyes flashing as she slotted it into her handheld device and flicked through the pictures and reports, her eyes lighting with glee. "Not a word to anyone, clear? You'd get yourself fired and I'd be thrown out faster than you can say 'breach of confidentiality,' got it?"

"Yes, yes. But what about my money?"

"Here." The woman handed her a check. "Three million credits, as promised."

The nurse sighed gratefully. She took the check and scrambled back towards her car. This would set her children up for a good life; maybe she could even afford to send them to an Ivy college, the best of the best. The war that had slain their father would not claim her children's lives, if she could get them a good enough education. She could finally pay off her own medical degrees, too.

Behind her, the reporter safely stored the pictures and reports and tucked the computer away, walking quickly towards the street and into her news van.

"Did you get it?" her camera man asked eagerly, shutting the van doors behind her.

"Yes," Eleana answered, pulling the data chip from her PDA and handing it to the grumpy-looking man. He broke into smiles, however, once he slotted the chip into the van's onboard computer and began surfing the images.

"We'll make bank on this," he said gleefully.

"Tell Marty to prep a situation room and get these into a slideshow. I want to make the morning news," Eleana ordered, banging on the divide between the equipment and driver's seat. Obediently, the driver started the car up and pulled out of the parking space.

"Aye, aye, ma'am," Nick said in response to her previous order. "We'll be on at 7 AM."

At the back of the van, Eleana strapped herself securely into one of the seats and flicked through the pictures.

~Back at the hospital~

Rebecca yawned quietly and turned on the holographic projector. It was clearly old and not quite as clear as her own, but it was adequate and she listened with half an ear as the woman on the screen talked about the weather in Denver.

"_And now, a special report. We have just learned that Spartan John, also known as John-117 or the Master Chief, did indeed return with the _Blade_ and is in critical condition in Denver's Hospital of Saintly Mercy, under the care of a squadron of doctors."_

Rebecca sat up immediately, frowning. That information, she had been told, was confidential. Admiral Hood had personally guaranteed her the silence of every single crew member of the _Blade_.

"_The Spartan was involved in a deadly battle with the Brute king, the War Chieftain, during the recent peace talks. Video of this battle is not available; it was confiscated by UNSC's Admiral Terrence Hood while en route back to Earth. However, these pictures will show how humanity's hero has suffered, defending us from the brutality of the Brutes."_

A 2D picture of the hospital room Rebecca was sitting in flashed on-screen; the quality was good, but it was clearly an old camera that had taken the picture, rendering it in two dimensions. Rebecca frowned " someone had taken a liberal approach with editing the image and had adjusted her expression to make it seem as though she was near tears.

The next few images were changed in the same way, though a few showed Rebecca leaning over the Spartan with a very loving expression on her face. Rebecca rolled her eyes; the rumors of romance had died down after she had put up the Private Property signs, but it seemed that someone was still utterly convinced that she was interested in the tall man on the hospital gurney beside her.

"They don't do you justice."

Rebecca glanced at the barely-awake John with a small smile. "How so?"

"Well, for one, I'd hope you're not going to cry over me," the Spartan answered softly. "The nurses would have to replace my bandages."

The woman giggled, then became serious again. "You're not angry?"

John blinked quietly. "I should be. Must be the morphine." He carefully wiggled into a more upright position. "I wonder who spilled the proverbial beans. Or let the cat out of the bag."

"You should go back to sleep."

"I'm too tired to sleep. I've been sleeping for days."

The woman smiled slightly. "Then we should watch something else. Why don't you pick?"

John shook his head very carefully, a small motion that wouldn't have been noticeable except that Rebecca was looking for it. "I'm in no shape to be picking anything. Except food. I'm hungry."

The woman chuckled slightly " John's appetite had come and gone when he was awake, because of the medicine, but the way he eyed the "call nurse" button clearly showed this was one of his ravenous periods. He hated pushing it, though " he wanted to be up and walking, but the doctors had threatened to drug him if he so much as tried. The repairs throughout his skeleton and muscles needed more time to heal.

Rebecca pushed the button and, within seconds, a cheery nurse bustled in. Upon seeing the news, she went pale, however.

"Oh" Oh, dear. Oh, honey, I'm so sorry." She tittered and gently patted John's head as though he was a child; the Spartan looked at Rebecca, his stoic expression pierced slightly by the utter humiliation of being consoled by a slightly off-kilter nurse. "Here, dear, let me turn that off for you. We won't let anyone bother you, never fear."

John shook his head slightly. "I'm hungry," he explained to the nurse as she checked his vital signs.

"Ooo, that's good! Your body needs food to heal. Big boy like you needs a lot of food. What do you want, dear?"

Clearly, John was thinking of cake; Rebecca recognized his "cake face," as she had come to call it. However, instead, he asked for some warm soup â€" healthier, anyway, and he wouldn't have to chew. After being fed via tube for the few days after he had woken up, John was eager to prove that he could do _some _things for himself.

"Coming right up, dear. And do you want anything, honey?" the nurse asked Rebecca, beaming.

"If it's not too much trouble, I'll have the same," Rebecca answered quietly.

"Oh, no trouble at all! Have to keep you healthy, too, dear." She winked, which made Rebecca blush slightly, and then bounced out of the room again.

"If she was any more energetic, I might scream," Rebecca muttered.

"Good spirits are important in a place like this," John said quietly, a rare moment of clarity breaking through the haze of drugs. It was getting more and more common as the Spartan fought against the medication, having spent most of his life with the idea that healing took second place to duty.

It had taken Rebecca, the Admiral, and Thel to convince John that obeying the doctors was the best thing he could do for the UNSC. The fleet was assembling even as the Spartan healed; the Spartan-IVs were being recalled from various places around the known universe, ships were being refitted with Sangheili weapons and defense technology. The _Knight of War_ and the _Herald of Deliverance_, twins to the _Blade_, were being finished and crewed with Sangheili/human ships. Xylin had returned from his mission to the Brute home world and was at Sanghelios, preparing their ships and collecting the Grunts.

It went without saying that Spartan-117 would move out with the ships. Admiral Hood estimated that the fleet would be battle-worthy within a month. So John set to recovering with a vengeance, testing his mobility a little more each day â€" though never when a doctor or nurse was in the room.

Rebecca stayed by his side the entire time, lending mental support and distracting the Spartan's mind from the necessities of war. The man was unused to the attention, however, and had tried to convince her to return home several times â€" for Chichi's sake, if nothing else. She had traveled back a few times in the two weeks he had been awake; each visit, Luke had had everything under control on her farm, Chichi had slobbered on her, and she had come back as quickly as possible, convinced that John would take a turn for the worse.

"I wonder how long until they'll let me walk," John mused as they waited for the food. Rebecca frowned.

"Perhaps another week. But you can't push it."

"I know." The Spartan smiled slightly, indulgently. "I'm not." He carefully lifted his arm â€" the same one that had been shattered at the shoulder â€" and flexed it, regrafted muscles bulging. "But if I don't get up and move around, I might lose muscle tone."

The woman snorted. "Which you can easily rebuild. Besides, with your body, no one could tell anyway." John smirked slightly and then glanced at the door as the nurse came bouncing back in, balancing a tray with two bowls of soup â€" and some crackers for Rebecca â€" easily.

"Here we are, dears! Eat up, eat up! And you have a visitor, John." The Spartan sat up a little straighter â€" ignoring the nurse's muttered protests â€" as Admiral Hood walked in just behind her. He usually sent word ahead, mostly to ensure John was awake.

"Sorry to barge in on you like this, John," he began. The Spartan shook his head mutely; it was no problem at all. He was, rather, a little confused. The admiral had been extremely busy recently and visited rarely. "I have some news I know you'll want to hear immediately. But eat up, first â€" I won't be responsible for starving you." He grinned and the Spartan raised an eyebrow in silent question, but Hood pulled up a seat and motioned for the pair to finish their soup.

John did so quickly, curious. Admiral Hood wasn't usually one to fidget but now he twiddled his thumbs, picked up the framed photo of John and Rebecca rough-housing â€" though very carefully on John's part â€" and then hummed quietly. Rebecca was just reaching the half-way point of her bowl of soup when John carefully set his empty bowl on the bed-side tray and focused on the admiral with a slightly apologetic glance at the woman, who just motioned for Lord Hood to begin.

"First, though, you have to promise to stay here," Hood said severely. "You can't be up and walking around yet â€" doctor's orders."

"Yes, sir." There was mild annoyance in John's tone, but it was overpowered by curiosity.

The admiral smiled slightly and then handed John a small hand-held computer. "These are top secret, but I expect you know how to keep a secret. And I know you do, ma'am." He nodded slightly to Rebecca, who was mid-way to her mouth with a spoon of soup and nodded, blushing slightly. "The Brute that attacked you," he continued, turning back to John, "was augmented. Like you are."

Rebecca and John both were silent; the former gaped, the latter frowned. "That actually explains a lot," he murmured. "I shouldn't be this beat up from a Brute."

"We just confirmed it. But we can't tell much more, except that whatever did it is far more technologically advanced than we are. They replicated the process biologically."

"How do I kill it?"

Hood shook his head. "I think that one was a prototype. We've examined the creature's speech and fighting patterns â€" it fought barbarically. It didn't make use of any openings you left, and it didn't do much more than pound on you." John winced slightly. "Not that that didn't do enough damage," Hood said bleakly. "Most Brutes know enough to do that much, and to get to the top of their hierarchyâ€"|" The admiral shook his head. "Which means that we need Spartans if we're going to defeat them. I've recalled the Fours, but they don't have your experience or augmentations. You'll need to lead them, and get them up to par. We've recruited another batch â€" we're going to increase the augmentations on them. What I wouldn't give for fifty of you, Chief." The Spartan-II nodded slightly, sharing the sentiment. Fifty Spartan-IIs, more than their original force, could infiltrate the home world, wreak havoc, and then detonate a FENRIS-style nuke.

"Do we know how many of these augmented Brutes there are?"

The man shook his head. "Xylin said they didn't see any nearly so big as the former War Chieftain on their trip to the home world. But they left the place in chaos. We're hoping it will be enough to distract whoever is doing this long enough for us to wipe them out."

"The Forerunners have to be behind it," John said, frowning. "They're the only things in the galaxy we know about with that kind of technology â€" just look at the Halos. Though whyâ€"|" Guilty Spark called humanity the Reclaimers. And according to Thel, they value peace above war."

"Their religious texts may be wrong," Hood pointed out. He had never been a big believer in any faith that relied on deities and translations. "We don't know if the War Chieftain was sent as a test of its abilities â€" or to kill you." John glanced up in surprise, cocking an eyebrow. "It would make sense to run a test of its abilities against you â€" though certainly not as a diplomat. Whoever set it at the top of the hierarchy clearly isn't interested in a smart leader, and they aren't looking to make peace with us, either. As for killing youâ€"|" Your reputation for destruction among the Covenant Loyalists is impressive."

"As is Thel's," John pointed out. "Could the Brutes be attempting assassination?"

"That's not their style," Hood answered grimly. "But with a new playerâ€"|" One that is clearly backing themâ€"|" anything's possible."

John nodded mutely. "When do we leave?" he asked.

"Next week. The doctors said you might be walking by then â€" you will use the weeks on our way out there to rest, recuperate, and get back into fighting trim. Hopefully, you'll lead a team of your brothers and sisters again."

John nodded carefully. The Fours weren't his brothers and sisters â€" more like distant cousins. He would have gladly given his life if only he could lead Blue Team again; one last sortie, as it were. "Is my armor repaired?"

"And upgraded. I think you'll be pleased. I will send a transport

when we're ready â€" and there will be no reporters this time around."

"Good," Rebecca growled. John nodded in agreement.

"Keep healing, John. I have a bad feeling about this war," Lord Hood said, standing.

"Yes, sir," the Chief replied with a careful salute. The man nodded in farewell, smiled slightly to Rebecca, and left quickly.

As the door clicked closed, John leaned back against his pillows, staring at the ceiling above him.

20. On the Slipspace Highway Again

_My sincere apologies for the late update! Finals and then holiday madness ensured I had no time to write over the past couple of weeks, so here's the next chapter at last. Please enjoy! Happy Holidays, everyone. _

I am introducing my own brand of Spartan IVs here, so please don't be alarmed!

****Chapter 19: On the Slipspace Highway Again****

_Human Date: July 7, 2555. _

Human Time: 05:38:49â€| and counting

_Advanced AI "Cortana" assigned to hybrid _The Double-Edged Blade_. Smart AI "New Start" reassigned to hybrid _Socket Rocket_. Dumb AI "Delivery Boy" assigned to personal logs on _Blade_. Dumb AI "Mailman" assigned to communications translation between Sangheili/Unggoy and human ships. Dumb AI "Falcon" assigned to medical bay on medical transport _Wings of Angles_. Dumb AI "Peacekeeper" assigned toâ€|_

The list continued as John read the assignments. Finally, he found his assignment; he was listed as a "NavSpecWep soldier" to keep the public from learning where the Chief would be assigned.

He was assigned to security on the _Blade_ again. John carefully stood, wary, still, of reinjuring himself. The doctors had reluctantly agreed to allow him short periods of "exercise" â€" which consisted of being allowed to walk around his room and not much else. Strictly forbidden from lifting any object heavier than a spoon with soup in it, John was nearing the end of his patience.

Rebecca had returned home, once it was clear that John would recover fully â€" though no one had doubted it in the least. Her going-away present was still on his table â€" a piled plate full of his favorite cake, cut into manageable pieces. She had bought it from a nearby grocery store, and teased him that it wouldn't be nearly as good as hers, but without a kitchen, she had little choice.

John paced back and forth, rotating his shoulders to ensure he still commanded a full range of motion. There were no signs of pain and no obvious injuries as he stretched slowly and carefully. From her spot

in the corner, his rehab specialist observed the movements critically.

"You're looking better. No stiffness, I take it?" she asked, glancing down at her notes.

"None," John confirmed, standing in parade rest once more.

Dr. Yohane smiled slightly. "You look fit to leave, then. Get dressed; your transport should be here momentarily."

"Thank you, doctor."

"You're welcome. It's good to see you back to normal."

John smiled tightly. "Normal" for a Spartan meant he could flip a Warthog over with ease â€" he wasn't quite back to that, yet, but he planned to spend the three weeks it would take to rendezvous with the Sangheili in the highest-gee portion of the ship's onboard gym.

The Master Chief quickly dressed in his body suit â€" a new modification to his MJOLNIR. The bodysuit was a secondary layer of protection between John's body and the armor, designed to monitor his health more intimately than the armor itself. It also would help deflect damage from Needler crystals that might get between the joints of his armor. Over it, he donned his uniform, though for anonymity's sake he had taken off all of the medals except a few that would identify him to the right people, as though his height wouldn't.

"Master Chief?" A private knocked on the door just as John was packing his bag â€" it contained only a few items, mostly toiletries and his clothing. His personal effects consisted of the picture with him and Rebecca playing in the snow and the cake â€" packed safely in a plastic box with a tight lid. "We're ready to leave when you are, sir."

"Thank you, Private." John shouldered his bag and followed the man out to the elevator, which was large enough to hold several gurneys at once, should the need arise. It took them to the Pelican pad up on the roof, where a transport was waiting for them. They boarded the ship with several of the Double Trouble team members who had been on guard duty in the hospital.

Once the location of the Spartan had been known, reporters, fans, and everyone with an excuse to visit the hospital had tried to visit the Master Chief as well. Thousands of vases of flowers, get-well cards, and other gifts flooded into the hospital; the smell alone had made the Chief nauseous, so he had asked Rebecca to relocate the flowers. Each card he had thrown away after reading, since he had nothing to do, and the other gifts â€" mostly booze of some kind, and lots of chocolate â€" he had given to Rebecca to do with as she saw fit. She had muttered something about Christmas presents.

The Pelican quickly broke through Earth's atmosphere and docked in the Blade's bay as one of several transports arriving. John went to the room he had been assigned â€" usually space for four, it would serve as his bunk and armor station.

When he opened the door using a passcode Cortana had given him, he

was greeted immediately by his armor. It was clean, green, and glowing slightly with the overshields fully powered on. He could see a couple of modifications, other than the pieces that had been replaced after the fight with the Brute.

John placed his bag on the bed in the corner and quickly unpacked. Captain Lee Nasaki announced that all personnel were on board and they were moving away from Earth to allow other ships to dock. The ship accelerated smoothly as the Captain continued listing the officers on board, including Admiral Hood, and the AIs responsible for different functions around the ship.

As he was inspecting his armor, John listened with one ear. He checked every seal and joint, but once again, the technicians had done a very good job. Other than adjusting the gel levels to his personal preference, John didn't need to do anything to the armor for it to be battle-ready.

John changed from his uniform into a set of fatigues from the closet â€" it had obviously been stocked for him specially, as the clothing actually fit â€" and headed for the gym. He passed quite a few of the Double Trouble troops who saluted him smartly and welcomed him back. As more soldiers did the same, including several Helljumpers he passed in the hallways, John began feeling slightly uncomfortable. The only people who usually treated him as a human being were his brothers and sisters, a few of the officers and brass he had worked closely with, and Rebecca. Even the brass he usually worked with treated him with the respect and courtesy due to a lethal yet sentient weapon, and the human-human familiarity they held with their senior officers was often absent from their dealings with him.

John found the gym easily. This early in the deployment, most people were still unpacking and familiarizing themselves with the ship, so the Spartan was alone in the large room. He quickly went to the highest-gee environment and began with the free weights.

After a full routine there, John began feeling a tightness in his muscles such as he hadn't felt since he was very young and still building his body up. He walked around the gym and then worked his way to a full sprint. He lapped the gym several times before his body began sending him signals that his doctors had told him meant that it had had enough.

John carefully stretched until his muscles were cool again and used a towel from the bin provided to wipe the sheen of sweat from his face and neck. The Master Chief glanced at the clock on the wall; he had been working out for a few hours, yet no one had yet come into the gym.

"Feeling better, John?" Cortana asked from the overhead speaker.

"Much," the Spartan answered, smiling slightly. "Thank you, Cortana."

"You're welcome."

"Where is everyone?"

"Giving you some time alone."

John blinked. He had automatically assumed no one had noticed his whereabouts, much less taken pains to respect an assumed wish for privacy. "Why?" he asked.

Cortana processed a feeling of slight pity for the tall man. He sounded soâ€¦ Confused. As though he couldn't possibly understand why the crew would respect his space, when they had avoided him on purpose during most of his life because of what the Spartan was.

"Because they appreciate you more now," she said. "They know you're mortal. That you're just as human as the rest of them. Even more so, maybe." John snorted as Cortana continued. "For over thirty years, you've been a Spartan â€" a war machine to their eyes. Now they've seen you bleed â€" hell, you died in front of their eyes. You're no longer just a machine to them. You're their brother, their comrade â€" their Chief."

"I'm one man, Cortana." The tall man shook his head, unsure of this new status. He had always been shunned by his own troops; it felt awkward to be included, even if it was by ignoring him.

"You're one Spartan, 117." Cortana's voice was soft. "You're a hero. You single-handedly started a civil war among the Brutes."

The Spartan winced slightly. "And nearly died to do it."

"But you did it. You've done more â€" lived through more â€" than most soldiers can even comprehend. You have knowledge and skills â€" instincts, if you will â€" that are very rare now. The DT troops spent a week training with you, and they're already scoring higher than Helljumpers in most of our combat simulations. You've been looking for a way to create instead of destroy, John â€" that's it. Train the next generation of soldiers."

"For what?" John asked bitterly, tossing the towel he was still holding into a chute to be taken into the domestic wing of the ship for laundering. "More war? Cortana, these are kids."

"So were you."

"I was different. I was trained to be this way. I can't imagine being something else. But these troops â€" they've had a life outside the UNSC. Iâ€¦ Weâ€¦ didn't."

"Does that mean they have any less right to fight to defend their family and friends?" Cortana asked. John frowned; the right to defend oneself and one's loved ones was one of the most important to him. "They want to learn, Chief. You'll keep them alive longer if you can teach them. You have three weeks â€" that's triple the amount of time you had with DT."

"Cortana, are there trainers on board?"

"Not this ship, but there are several throughout the fleet."

"Can you arrange for a meeting between us?"

"Of course. When?"

"As soon as possible. I'd like to coordinate our training."

"We'll exit Slipspace several times between now and the rendezvous point, so you can switch ships then and trade training tips with other trainers."

"It will probably be a one-way exchange," John mused, smirking slightly. "Thanks, Cortana. Let me know when you can get everyone in a meeting."

"Sure thing." John left the gym and walked quickly back to his room. Once again, soldiers and troops greeted him with smiles and friendly questions after his health. Officers had started roaming as well, and quickly released John from salute when he passed them with as much familiarity as allowed.

After a quick shower, the Spartan headed for the cafeteria, piled his tray with rehydrated flash-frozen food, and quickly found a lone table. Half-way through the meal, Private Ebon, his mandibles held in a position of respect, sat down opposite the Chief.

"Sir," he said in greeting, setting his tray down.

"Private." The man waited. Private Ebon was one of the best soldiers in the Double Trouble troops, and had earned John's respect several times during training.

However, the Elite merely began eating, and after a moment, another one of the DT troops sat next to Ebon with a grin and salute for the Chief.

Once the third member joined the table, John began to loosen up slightly. They were obviously just socializing and trying to do so with the Spartan as well, exactly as Cortana had said.

By the fifth, he had finished his food but, instead of leaving, pushed his tray aside and listened idly to the banter along the table, now filled to capacity. There was a slight space around him, but John sensed that his neighbors left that space out of respect for his office, not fear or any other emotion.

During a natural lull in the conversation, one of the troopers " a human PFC named Dirk Ridder " turned to the Chief and asked, "So, Master Chief, ever played Bridge on Fire?"

John raised an eyebrow slightly and shook his head. "I've never heard of it," he admitted. The soldiers around the table " including the two Elites " grinned.

"Imagine poker with a little "Go Fish" thrown in," Private Selenason explained. "We adapted it from poker so we aren't betting. Sangheili don't like to bet on card games." The human troops at the table were grinning; there was obviously a story behind that. "But they do like the "spot the liar" part."

Selenason produced a deck of ratty cards even as Private Ridder cleared all the trays, including the Chief's. "Would you like to play, Chief?" Selenason asked, already dealing John in; with a rueful smile, John took up his hand when everyone else did.

The rules were fairly easy to understand. Instead of betting, each player called a card they might or might not have. The rest were given a chance â€" they either called "Bridge on Fire" if they thought the player didn't have that card, or "Safe" if they did. Once everyone had chosen their stance, the player gave those who were correct a single card â€" chosen by chance â€" from his hand. The object was to collect the full deck. It got easier as the game progressed, if you held the biggest hand.

For John, the game quickly took on a pattern and he soon began memorizing the hands players might have based on their turns. The Elites had less control over their expressions and facial tics, which the Spartan quickly noted; the humans were slightly harder, even though he was more familiar with reading their faces. From what he knew of their culture, Sangheili weren't as duplicitous as humanity, one reason the Prophets had been able to control an entire alien race so effectively.

After a few games, though, John felt it was time to retire. He had enjoyed the down time with his troops, but he knew that becoming too familiar with them could lead to problems. It never did with his Spartans because they were soldiers first, but these men, women, and Sangheili had thoughts, memories, and desires outside of the military. Well, maybe not the Sangheili â€" John didn't know what older or wounded Elites did.

He left the troops to their game; his spot was quickly taken by a few of the onlookers. Back in his room, the Spartan quickly donned his armor. He was back on duty, and though others may be treating him more like a comrade than before, he was still a Spartan, still John-117.

"John?" Cortana's voice came over the intercom; the Spartan nodded to show he was listening as he tightened his boot. "The trainers are ready to talk to you."

"Thanks, Cortana." Jon crossed the room to the holographic communications center and started the camera and holograms. Several people answered his call immediately; they had the UNSC trainer look about them. Three were women; five were men. All were scarred and mean-looking.

"Sierra-117," one of them said in greeting. "Cortana said you wanted to talk to the trainers."

John nodded, removing his helmet. "I trained the Double Trouble troops for a week on our way to the planet Sacrifice. I have limited capabilities when it comes to training, though."

One of the trainers snorted. "Laddy, judgin' from deir scores, yer better'n most." The scar running across his eyes kept twitching as he spoke; his face and hair made it obvious that he was of Scottish descent.

John nodded slightly, acknowledging the compliment. "I'd like to reproduce those results throughout the fleet."

"So would we," one of the women told him with a grin. "I dunno what you did to 'em, but they're easily matching Helljumpers on our

sims."

"Aye, and the Hellies ain't all that happy 'bout it," the Scotsman chuckled.

"I will continue training the Double Trouble troopers onboard the Blade until our first exit from SlipSpace. Then I hope to transfer between ships and learn from each of you."

"Ah think we'll be doin' the learnin', Master Chief." The Scottish trainer scratched his clean-shaven face. "But 't sounds lik'ah solid plan. So, whatcha been doin' to the poor lads and lassies?"

John quickly explained his training techniques of pitting his troops against Veteran Elites and the Arbiter, even himself, to teach them first how to lose, and then how to win. Each ship carried a token force of Elites on board, headed by at least two Veterans, so the trainers had plenty of fodder for their experiments. The woman who had informed John about his training success stated that the full-human troops on most of the ships would be outmatched enough by a group of Minors that Veterans weren't yet necessary.

After a good long talk, discussing and trading training tips, each one left the conference armed and ready to train in radically new ways. John had learned several drills and maneuvers that had been specifically developed to take out the Covenant's superior technology and warriors within the past decade, including many that had been developed from videos of him and other Spartans fighting their alien enemies.

Cortana rounded up the Double Trouble troops and several Veterans, though Thel was not in attendance, at John's request. They met in the gym; John began experimenting with the tricks and drills the other trainers had taught him. His troops responded eagerly and well to the various exercises, and the Veterans found themselves matched and often overcome, despite using all their combat knowledge to outmaneuver the Minors and Privates.

After several hard-run simulations, the Master Chief called a rest and ordered his troops to sit in a semi-circle while he set up a small holographic display. They watched with interest as John quickly inserted a memory disk; the Veterans stood at discrete distances, eager to see what new methods the Spartan had devised to train his troops.

"This is a new branch of training we're going to experiment with," John told his troops, bringing up the files. "You'll be the first to see these files; they've been classified since I recorded them." That made everyone in the room sit up and pay closer attention. "This is Installation 04, which Captain Keyes found by accident." On screen, the first Halo humanity had seen floated serenely. The feed was from one of the Autumn's outer cameras. "This is where we first encountered the Flood." The feed zoomed forward; John remembered the short conversation he had with Keyes as the man's face sped through. It came to a halt and played at a normal speed as John made his way off the ship with Cortana on board.

The Sangheili watching flinched slightly every time one of their former comrades entered the screen; obviously, the self-hate the entire race still held over being used as blind puppets by the

Prophets ran deep within even these younger Minors. The humans cheered as the lifeboat blasted out of its cradle and headed for the ring.

John forwarded the feed until he was facing a pair of Hunters, alone and â€" he explained â€" with very little ammunition left in his rifle, a pistol, and two plasma grenades from a pair of Grunts he had dispatched before. He paused the feed allow his troops to take in the situation.

"Before you see how I handled these Hunters, any suggestions?" John asked. Private Ebon frowned slightly and then stood, walking over to the display.

"They are guarding this structure. It would be folly to sneak around them; then you would have enemies at your back, and tough ones."

Private Ridder agreed and joined the Minor at the table. "I would try to stick those plasma 'nades to them," he said. "It'd be hard to sneak up on them. Distracting them would be best."

"With what?" Private Smithers joined the pair. "But if you wanted to, you could take them one-on-one, right?"

The Veterans and John shook their heads all at once. "Hunters are extremely strong and fast. They're armed with hand-mounted plasma cannons and spines that can cut a Spartan clean in half." John had seen it happen; it had nearly happened to him.

"So, hand-to-hand is out. Their armor is too thick to pierce with your rifle. The grenades will only piss them off if you don't plant them very carefully."

The entire team debated for a while, with input from other members of Double Trouble, before coming up with a battle plan. John played the feed; he had chosen a more direct route than his soldiers had proposed, but running their idea through his head, he realized it would have been a lot safer.

The Double Trouble soldiers watched silently as the battle played out, and cheered when it was over and the Master Chief stood victorious.

John continued playing scenarios from his and his teammates' video recordings. He included hypothetical battles as well, against Brutes and their ships.

After everyone had offered a strategy, John dismissed his troops. He closed the video feeds as well, returning the memory crystal to the pocket of his armor. Cortana had compiled the videos he had requested, as well as a few she had thought would be beneficial, during his conference with the trainers.

The Master Chief went back to his room and removed his armor. He had taken a few hard hits during the training session and wanted to make sure it wasn't damaged. However, the upgrades had made it even tougher than he was used to, and it had barely a scratch.

After a quick shower and a meal, once again surrounded by his troops,

John slept for a few hours.

This pattern repeated over the five standard days the fleet was in Slipspace. During that time, John visited the medical bay regularly to ensure his muscles and bones " regrafted, where necessary, with an upgraded version of the agent that had been added as a teenager - were cooperating in his healing. The Spartan began spending more time with his troops outside of the gym, learning about them as human beings and Sangheili juveniles. He became very good at Bridge on Fire, and was challenged to a match at almost every meal.

Cortana kept him updated about the progress of the training on other ships. The strategic battle planning sessions he had introduced into the Double Trouble teams had been utilized with other groups to various degrees of success. Many UNSC soldiers were just that " men and women who wanted orders, and would follow them to the letter " and didn't believe themselves responsible and/or capable of planning a battle. However, for their COs and a select few, the sessions began taking on something akin to recess at school, where they exercised their minds as well as their bodies.

Several members of Double Trouble, especially Private Ridder, began standing out as superb tacticians. John promoted them to Chief Petty Officers and split DT into five smaller groups. He slowly began molding them into the same kind of team he and his Spartans had been " a small relief force that traveled quickly from place to place, supporting the line where it was weak and making lone forays into enemy territory. The Helljumpers on board began seeing the DT as usurping their place in the military ranks, and several fist fights broke out between the two factions, though the Elites couldn't understand the jealousy between them. They were simply glad to have warriors on their side, no matter what label they carried.

After Private Smithers was sent to the medical bay with a broken jaw, and his opponent with a shattered nose, John called all of the ODSTs and DT members to the gym. The humans sat sullenly apart from one another, shooting murderous looks back and forth, while the Elites tried to ignore the obvious tension in the room.

John glanced between the two groups; he had forsaken his armor for the day because he wanted the troops to understand that, besides being a Spartan, he was their CO, so he wore his uniform with its chest-full of medals. "We are about to enter a war that will be more deadly " and possibly more costly " than the Human-Covenant war. The Brutes don't care if you're a Helljumper, a Spartan, or a Double Trouble soldier. They'll kill you just the same. I know we're stepping on toes." John turned to the ODSTs. "Spartans and Helljumpers clashed for years. Your position in the UNSC is revered and unique, as is mine, as is DT. They are unique in different ways. There is no need to be fighting amongst ourselves. Every single soldier that we put out of commission ourselves, with a broken jaw or what have you, is another soldier we will sorely miss on the battlefield."

The Spartan turned back towards his DT troops. "Most of the Helljumpers on board are combat veterans. They have seen and fought Brutes before. Learn from them. Our simulated battle training is not enough; you have minutes to come up with a battle plan in the safety of this gym. In the real fight, you have seconds " and you may be wounded, protecting your partner, or so tired you think you'd fall

asleep the moment you blinked. It is an entirely different beast. You fought half a dozen Brutes, all together, on Sacrifice; in the middle of the battle, you will be surrounded by hundreds, if not thousands, of them. People will be dying; they will be distracting you. Learn from Helljumpers; they have many battles under their collective belts."

He addressed a few specifics, assigned punishment duty to the brawlers, and released the ODS to begin his troop's training. Though there were a few muttered insults, John let them slide. The younger DT troops would soon learn to respect the older, tried-in-battle Helljumpers.

After a good three hours of combat simulation between groups of Elites and humans, without the Veterans, the Master Chief released the soldiers for well-deserved showers and dinner. John retired to his room and donned his armor once more. The Spartan IVs on board had approached him about training together, and he had gladly accepted. They were due to meet in the gym momentarily.

John was the first to arrive in the room and moved to the highest-gee section, warming up on the free weights, though even the heaviest barely strained him with the MJOLNIR on.

"Master Chief?"

John glanced up to see a group of five Spartan IVs standing at the entrance to the gym. They moved silently towards him as he replaced the weights and met them at the half-way point, sizing each new Spartan up against his brothers and sisters. They were slightly smaller, their armor not nearly so dense; the GEN2 was designed to be lighter and more personable.

Cortana had given him the specs for their equipment; it wasn't as powerful as Spartan II gear, but it was better than the average Marine. It was more customizable, and they could don the armor in a matter of minutes, rather than the hours it had originally taken John and his brothers and sisters. Though John could put his own armor on now, thanks to the upgrades in the MJOLNIR, it had originally taken a team of technicians and several hours to gear up.

Their name tags glowed on his HUD; all were part of Fireteam Legends. Unlike the IIs, the IVs had different colored armor, probably to tell them apart while geared up. That had been one failing of John's generation "every Spartan II was the same to an outsider. The navy-blue-gear IV was Senior Chief Petty Officer Miranda Lazlakovic. The rest of the IVs ranked as Petty Officer First Class: Cole Carter in a deep purple armor, Jason Basky in muted yellow, Scott Landmen in dark red, and Lizzy Naomi in violet.

John tilted his head in greetings; the five Spartan IVs watched him carefully through their helmets. By the slight tilts of heads and ticks in fingers, the Spartan II knew they were talking "he took off his helmet and motioned for them to do the same. "I may not be of your generation," he told them lightly, "but I can tell when a Spartan is talking."

All five removed their helmets together, tucking them under one arm. Lazlakovic had hazel eyes, deep brown skin, and black hair "the combination was startling, to someone who knew genetics. Carter and

Landsmen could have been brothers; both had shorn brown hair, brown eyes, and slightly freckled, light-skinned faces, but Landsmen was thicker-built. Basky's yellow-blond hair and slightly tallow skin matched his armor; his deep blue eyes stood out starkly in contrast. Naomi had red hair that reminded John of Linda, but her eyes were brown and her skin slightly lighter.

Every single one had scars from battle; the Spartan IV program had taken consenting adults, not children, into its augmentations. By the looks of them, all five of Fireteam Legends had been ODSTs at one point.

"I am Master Chief John-117." There was another difference; instead of numbers, the IVs had real names; they had histories connected to their family names and could trace their ancestry, if they chose. They had surely seen the MCPON designation on their HUDs already. "Let's get started."

The IVs accepted his leadership easily and John felt himself resuming it with relief. He was, once again, in charge of one of the deadliest combat teams on humanity's side. Though they were slightly smaller, leaner, and younger, John felt at ease once more. He sparred one-on-one with each, and was evenly matched; he felt something akin to joy to be fighting someone so closely matched to himself once again.

Naomi was quick on her feet, though not nearly so fast as Kelly, and utilized rabbit punches more than anything else. She was prone to leaving her guard down, however, just after attacking, a fact that John took advantage of several times. They traded suggestions as they battled, with occasional comments from the peanut gallery.

Lazlakovic was slower but stronger; she allowed blows to land when she could have blocked them in favor of striking her opponent. It was a good tactic for a fully-armored Spartan, but against Brutes, it could mean death. She and John also worked to improve each other's skills, and by the end of their sparring session, Lazlakovic was blocking more blows.

Carter was both quick to attack and defend; he bounced around the gym easily, full of extra energy. John, in his heavier armor, found it a challenge to keep up, and began to anticipate Carter's movements instead. The Spartan IV enjoyed combination attacks but often made the same combos time and again, which John learned to look for and then counter.

Basky was very defensive, always blocking a hit and only returning ones that were obviously going to connect. John began leaving openings for the IV to take advantage of, and then turning the tide with a quick "and often unorthodox" counter-attack. During a break, while Naomi and Carter went at it, Basky told John he was a heavy-weapons specialist, used to defending bunkers with large machines, which accounted for much of his defensiveness on the battlefield.

Landsmen was light on his feet, bouncing on the balls of his toes just before attacking. He employed the same rabbit punches as Naomi, but had more strength behind them. He also preferred hitting his opponent from behind and then backing away, out of range; it was a

good tactic for a Brute, who could move easily but couldn't see very well in their peripheries. The Spartan IV showed John a few moves he had improvised to fit his methods, which worked very well against both an unsuspecting Basky and John himself.

By the time John had sparred a couple times with the Spartan IV, and they had fought against each other at least once as well, all six Spartans were breathing heavily through their helmets. John pulled off his helmet to thank the fours, and to wipe the sweat from his eyes, and was surprised when Lazlakovic offered her hand.

"It was a real honor," she said proudly. "I've heard stories but, well, they don't exactly do you justice. You're a lot more personable than rumor has it."

John chuckled slightly, shaking her hand in a firm grip that he could only use with other augmented soldiers. "The honor was mine. Would you like to spar again?"

"Once my bruises heal!" Carter laughed from across the gym where he was re-shelving the weights he had knocked over during his last sparring session. "You hit like a wall. With fists."

"Knock it off, goosehead," Naomi snorted. They settled into a childish, yet entertaining, name-calling fight across the gym. John raised an eyebrow at Lazlakovic, who shrugged with a grin.

"We might be augmented, but at the core, we're ODST," she explained. "We've served in the same unit for years. We're Spartans, but we don't have to be so uptight about it." John nodded slightly. The display of camaraderie between Naomi and Carter had reminded him painfully of the jokes and pranks between his brothers and sisters as teenagers.

Too tired to spar again, Naomi and Carter had settled into a "best riddle" competition. John listened with half an ear as the pair traded increasingly-difficult riddles and word games; Carter eventually won, frustrating Naomi with a riddle about AIs, just as he was finished tidying the gym.

To be back among soldiers such as these made John relax slightly. He had, originally, thought that he wouldn't take to the IVs as brothers and sisters, and while they weren't so close â€" yet, a part of his mind told him â€" as Kelly, Linda, Fred, Sam, and his other Spartan II siblings, he could see the Spartan spirit deeply within all of them.

21. Epilogue

_Please leave a review if you read this. I love to hear your thoughts about the chapters. _

This will be the last chapter of this part of the story. The next installment yet needs a name, but it will feature the Spartan IIs on Onyx, with Halsey, Mendez, and the IIIs. It will be the same time frame, mostly, but in different settings. If you have ideas about the title, or if you'd like to suggest names for OCs, please let me know in a review or PM.

****Chapter 20: Epilogue****

John shook his head free of water as he stared at the mirror. The dry air of the ship quickly dried his skin and left him with goose pimples as he shaved and brushed his teeth. The Spartan dressed quickly in his bodysuit and then donned his armor. The call had come through the ship while John was asleep, but it had woken him quickly: the fleet was at the rendezvous point and about to drop out of Slipspace.

They would appear just a few thousand kilometers from the outermost planet of the system where the Sangheili had agreed to meet them. Thanks to the improvements in Slipspace drive software Cortana and other ONI AIs had compiled and then improved upon from the Covenant, human ships could now jump with the precision their once-enemies had used to such incredible advantage.

DT was already waiting for him in their designated hangar, all five teams arranged neatly out of the way of the engineers and pilots. The IVs stood off to the side, running last-minute equipment and armor systems checks on each other through small datapads linked to the bases of their helmets. The pilots cursed loudly in the hangar, yelling for this part or that person. The engineers moved quietly, in comparison, though any vocal noise they didn't make was more than compensated for by the heavy machinery loading Pelican and Peliship guns and cargo bays.

Fully half of the overloaded human ships' dropships would be transferring to various Sangheili ships, whose resources had been severely reduced after the split of the Covenant. Without the ship yards and Engineers, they hadn't been able to rebuild many dropships, either, which was why anything capable of transporting goods or crew had been commandeered from Earth to staff their ally's ships.

DT came to attention as John walked over, his unshielded boots clunking thickly on the floor. Something in the steel, a Sangheili design, swallowed most of the hollow thumping, but it still sounded ominous.

"Sir, Troops One through Five ready!" John's second in command, Private Ridder, stepped forward and snapped off a crisp salute, followed by the rest of the troops and the IVs.

"The Spartan Fours have requested permission to tag along, sir!" Lazlakovic stepped forward, helmet under her elbow.

John's DT would be one of the sets of troops transferring to Sangheili ships "and not just any ship, but the Arbiter's ship, which had first rescued him from the Forward Unto Dawn. He nodded; he had received the orders from Admiral Hood just before, via Cortana.

Cortana would not be going with him, though, which made John slightly uneasy. He hadn't gone into battle without her for more years than he cared to think about. Her replacement AI had been requisitioned for mail duty, so he was, for once, completely alone in his armor. The neural enhancements meant that his reflexes wouldn't miss the AI's help, but he would miss Cortana's banter and intelligence.

"Granted," he told Lazlakovic, returning the salute to all of the soldiers. The assumed parade rest; he could see the small tells on each of the Double Trouble troops as they fidgeted. "We're dropping out in five minutes. Prepare to make a quick jump; this is only a rendezvous point."

"Sir, yes, sir!" the troops barked, hefting backpacks and duffle bags; they were stuffed, he knew, with weapons, ammunition, food, and clothing. Sangheili food wasn't palatable to many humans, and most of the humans in the Double Trouble troops had chosen to bring their own weapons. John had his energy sword in one thigh pocket; his bag of clothing was already on a Pelican â€" a perk of leadership â€" and the repair kit necessary for his and the IV's armor was already loaded as well.

"Load up," John ordered. His troops split quickly, weaving around last-minute preparations and securing their cargo and themselves into their designated ships. Each ship carried a pile of cargo â€" again, mostly food and ammunition â€" in the middle section, and three had Warthogs strapped to their underbellies. The Scorpions would stay on the Blade, simply because they were harder to fit in Sangheili hangars.

The ship around them boomed, shuddered, and came out of Slipspace. John braced himself as they decelerated slowly; a couple of engineers went skidding around on their wheeled carts, crashing into pilots, other engineers, or piles of cargo. One skidded into Carter, whose armor saved him a broken ankle â€" he quickly set the engineer back on her feet and braced her as the ship slid to the side again.

John looked up as the speakers crackled to life. "All hands, prepare for departure." Cortana sounded calm even though this was a rougher drop than John had experienced on the Blade before.

The last few people still on the hangar deck ran into the safety of the ship; John and Carter, last to board, hopped into their respective Pelicans and shut the hatches behind them. John was with a group of his DTs; the other Spartans were spread out among the other half-dozen Peliships waiting for the hangar to depressurize.

The door slid open in front of the cockpit; John climbed forward to look out over the pilot's shoulder. Black, empty space greeted them â€" and then an icy comet streaked by, pelting the hangar with shards of ice as thick as a man was tall.

"Shit!" the pilot cursed as a shard pinged off the Pelican's nose with a clang. "What the hell?!"

"Cortana, talk to me, what's going on?" John asked, opening a private comm link between himself and the main ship.

Cortana's harried voice snapped back, "We're not where we're supposed to be! Who the-" She shut off the comm with a snap.

"We gotta close those doors," another pilot screamed over the radio. "I'm getting pecked to bits!"

"Controls aren't responding," an engineer replied from inside the ship. "Hold on, we're working on it."

"DT, move forward," John ordered, going back to the back haft. The troops obeyed instantly, squeezing into the tiny cabin and sealing the door shut. It was a good thing there had only been half a dozen humans and two Elites; they barely fit as it was, the pilot pressed against his instrument panels.

John checked that his suit was sealed and opened the hatch; the explosive decompression shoved him into the hangar and pushed the Pelican forward; he twisted and managed to smack the hatch button again. It closed as he sped towards the hangar's back wall.

The Spartan inverted himself, managing to land on his boots when he hit the wall. He absorbed the impact so that he wouldn't fly off of it and activated the magnetic controls; he had to drop the shields, which meant he wasn't protected from ice so well, but it was necessary if he wanted to get to the manual controls quickly.

One of the Pelicans broke loose of its restraints, spinning into the comet's path. John watched it as he walked around the wall; he couldn't move too quickly or he might set himself spinning out of the ship, magnetic boots or no. It was smashed by a chunk of ice as large as a small house; the ice hurtled past, the ship's nose buckled onto its leading edge like a crumpled paper plane.

"Master Chief, we're gettin' a little chilled out here," one of the troopers joked weakly on the radio. John glanced at the tag "it" was one of the soldiers from the Pelican that had just been smashed. There was still a few minutes of air left for them, probably, before the cold vacuum tore the ship apart. John clomped towards his goal, anger rising in the back of his mind. He couldn't protect his troops "but they didn't need to die this way. "Was a pleasure! S-s-serving with ya, all a'ya." The private, named Turtan, sighed and the comm went dead.

"Hangars five through eight compromised. Ten not responding." Cortana listed errors in John's ear; he shut that comm off, too, and finally reached his goal. He grabbed the large handle, twisting it and then slamming it home. The blast doors came down quickly and the Pelicans immediately backed away from them as quickly as possible, releasing the tension on their restraining straps.

John crossed to the engineer's room and yanked open the door; the engineers inside had been killed by a chunk of ice the size of a horse, but the controls were marginally operable. The Spartan keyed in the atmosphere system; it roared to life and started filling the hangar with pressurized air and oxygen. It would take five minutes to fully recover from the vacuum, and John used those minutes to check every single Pelican critically. Two wouldn't be any good for sorties; ice had bent wings or smashed guns and engines. One Warthog was missing; it must have broken loose while John had been moving out of the Pelican.

Except for the one Pelican, however, no one had any major injuries in their hangar. The hatches began opened as John's armor unsealed itself; oxygen and pressure was back to normal, though gravity was still out. Soldiers, pilots, and Spartans all headed for the interior of the ship, unwilling to risk another ice chunk breaking through the blast doors and sending them all out into space.

"DT, head for the gym and wait for orders there. Spartans, with me,"

John ordered crisply. He didn't know what had happened " or why " but if three other hangars were in the same situation, they needed to be closed before more personnel could be lost.

He sent each of the Spartans to a hangar, telling them to shut the blast doors manually if necessary and report on what they found. He did the same as the ship blared alarms in the areas with pressure. In the opened hangars, however, there was no noise but his own breathing and the muffled sound of his heartbeat.

In all, five hangars had been unable to close after being so explosively decompressed. All of them were quickly shut by one of the Spartans and the troops inside herded into the pressurized areas of the ship as soon as it was safe. Gravity came back online just as John was finished with the final evacuation.

The six Spartans then converged and headed for the bridge. The Fours waited outside as John went into the bridge itself. Cortana was glowing hotly on her pedestal, barking out orders, warnings, errors, and calculations.

"Sir, permission to enter the bridge," John called to the Admiral over Cortana's voice, and the voices of the bridge crew yelling status reports. Admiral Hood waved him up to the viewport where they could see the comet streaking away now. John looked around; three ships were missing.

"Swallowed by that thing," Admiral Hood said, gesturing to the three ships on his "KIA" list.

"The hangars are secure, sir, and all personnel have been evacuated to the interior of the ship."

"What are our casualties?" Hood asked, accepting a holoscreen from a specialist who whizzed by on her way to her post.

"Three Pelicans, two Peliships, one Warthog, twenty-three humans, two Elites, and eight engineers, sir," John answered promptly. "Three dozen wounded; they're at the medical bay already."

"Good." Hood looked over the holoscreen and put it down on the holopanel in front of him; it produced a 3D image of the comet that had hurt them so much. "This thing pulled us out of Slipspace."

John blinked. He hadn't thought that was possible.

"It shouldn't be possible," Cortana sighed, turning on her pedestal to observe the Spartan. The human ships had regrouped into their formation behind the Blade; the noise had dropped as bridge crew handled the disaster. "Admiral, we lost a total of two frigates and all their cargo, plus a stealth-class, and our five dropships. No other ships were that close to the comet; their hangar doors closed on their own. No lives lost on other ships, sir."

"How did we get pulled out of Slipspace, Cortana?" Hood demanded; he wasn't angry, at least not at her, but he was looking for answers.

Cortana shook her head. "Theoretically, it's a possibility for

something to so disrupt Slipspace â€" a large enough comet entering, for example â€" and cause such a catastrophic burn. But there are too many variables; it was _theoretically_ possible, but it wouldn't happenâ€|"

"It just did," Hood reminded the AI. "Could it have been an attack?"

"Someone would have had to know exactly where we entered Slipspace, be able to track our progress despite the drop-outs we made to muddy our trail, and know where we were going. _Then_ they would have to make a comet â€" or something large enough â€" plow "into" us and knock us outâ€| If something could do that, sir, they could have just crushed us. My subroutines insist it is a coincidence. I am not so sure."

"Could it be our friends' friend?"

"Whoever's behind the Brutes?" Cortana frowned. "It might be possible. They did genetically alter a Brute. We don't know what they're capable of; that could be child's play to them. But why would they just knock us out of orbit? Why not just crush us all?"

"A diversion?" John suggested. "To keep us from reaching the Sangheili."

Hood frowned. "I don't like that at _all_. Helmsman!" The man turned and saluted. "Get us to the rendezvous as fast as possible. Any ships that are unable to enter Slipspaceâ€| Will have to be left behind."

"Master Chief, see to it your troops are fit and then report to the engineers. The last thing we need is one of you losing your armor." John saluted; the admiral dismissed him and the Spartan quickly left the bridge, sending the IVs immediately to the engineers and going to the gym himself. His troops were well, though shocked by what had happened; they quietly mourned their comrades who had been sucked into the comet's path. John told them to go back to their bunks and then reported to the engineers.

Only one ship ended up being abandoned; as the engines started warming up again, the crew of that ship evacuated to the _Blade_, bringing with them as much as possible in the way of cargo and weapons. They then set the sit remotely to a sustainable orbit around a nearby solar system, for retrieval later.

By the time all of the formation was ready to jump back into Slipspace, John and his Spartans had been unloading Pelicans for an hour. Most of the heavy machinery had been thrown about â€" or lost to space â€" so the engineers needed the help to get all of the cargo separated from the Pelicans for repairs.

The ship rumbled into Slipspace just as John stacked the last crate of explosives and tied it down with extra care. Engineers relaxed, subtly, as Cortana came through the speakers to assure them all was well. They would make the rendezvous point within three hours; the comet had knocked them out of their original path, apparently, on a little "side trip."

John headed for the mess after letting the engineers and technicians

take his armor for repairs and a thorough testing. The few soldiers he passed in the hallway saluted him with awe in their eyes, those who weren't his own troopers. Apparently the story of his actions in the hangars had spread throughout the fleet.

The IVs were already there when the Spartan II entered the cafeteria, packed with hungry pilots and soldiers who didn't want to be alone as they dealt with the shock of being attacked in a place they had felt "safe."

The tall man grabbed a tray and food and sat with the IVs when Lazlakovic waved him over. He sat down and ate quickly; the IVs were just as interested in their own food, and nearby soldiers stole covert glances at the table of Spartans.

Once all six were satisfied, they piled their trays in the middle of the table and began discussing what had happened. Soldiers from the abandoned ship leaned forward to listen; others added their own stories as everyone tried to puzzle out what happened.

"Ah was just sitting there, ready to get going, yanno, and suddenly alarms're ringing and the ship's a-rockin' like a ship at sea," one woman related, tossing her pink-blonde hair over one shoulder. She was from the abandoned ship and had been one of the last to get on the Blade. "Thank the gods we didna have hangar probl'ns. We'd've been dead meat without yer Spartans."

"Yeah," soldiers agreed, nodding. This, of course, sparked a retelling of John's "heroic" march, which devolved into story-telling. John excused himself as the soldiers began relating tales of his former brothers and sisters, mostly myths and stories from their older siblings or commanders.

Naomi followed him out; she caught up to him and silently nudged him away from the cabins and towards the gym. John allowed her to herd him, knowing that they both needed an outlet after what had happened.

They warmed up separately, stretching to make sure they didn't injure themselves or each other. John used the time to calm the simmering anger at himself and, mostly, at whoever was behind the attack for loosing troops. Naomi centered herself and hoped John would be formidable even without his armor, and certainly stronger than her would find the sparring session relaxing.

The IVs didn't have the same problems as the IIs; having been accepted into the program as adults, they had fully matured, both physically and mentally, before being altered. Naomi still marveled at her strength now, still found pleasure in moving so quickly she could literally blur to a human eye when really trying. Lazlakovic had warned them all, however, that John was a different breed entirely even from his fellow IIs.

He took his responsibilities seriously, a mark of a good leader but he also blamed himself for things beyond his control. It didn't affect his leadership, nor did he allow it to hamper his skills, but she could feel the self-directed anger in the tense way he held himself. He was a big brother, father, and CO all in one, a difficult juggling of positions that he made effortless.

According to Cortana, he was also the last II known alive. He had watched most of his brothers and sisters die, usually murdered. Naomi also knew about the dirty secret of the II program, about the deaths and mutilations that had happened during the augmentation process. She knew that he had been taken as a child and had bonded to those IIs as fiercely as anyone could bond to another person, but they had not been able to mature normally. Adulthood had been thrust upon them; they were killing machines at the age of thirteen, though Cortana had hinted that John had reached that stage before that.

It told on John; he didn't know how to handle losing his soldiers well. He worked through it, but Naomi had a suspicion that he still carried every single death he had witnessed " or thought he could have prevented " with him, a burden that was unhealthy even for those who had been trained in a more normal fashion.

So when John initiated the sparring session without a word, Naomi was ready to let him take out his anger and frustration for a while before trying to talk to him. She ran the larger man around the gym a few times, trading blows " both careful to avoid serious injury " and silently assessing him. He moved like a man in his prime, but the age signs were there. He was at least forty, just at the tail end of his prime. Though he still had the figure of a rock-hard athlete, and the stamina and strength of a man many times his junior, Naomi could see the damage his abused body had taken. It was hardly noticeable, and the only people who could take advantage of it were other Spartans and maybe fast Brutes.

Finally, John rolled Naomi to the floor with a clever kick and pounced, pinning her slender arms at the elbow and hooking his feet over her thighs so she couldn't get her legs under herself and push him off. She struggled experimentally but the heavier man had her pinned; she finally went limp.

"I yield," she panted; John stood up fluidly and offered a hand. She pulled herself up and smiled. "That was a neat little trick, the leg thing."

John smirked slightly. He had gotten better at using facial expression to soften his harsh-sounding voice, but was still a little wooden about it. Smiling " not to mention laughter " didn't come to the old soldier so easily anymore, but he had the humor and wit to be quite the jokester. Once upon a time, Cortana had said, he had been " as jolly as any child. But the years of warfare, of leading men and women to their deaths, had locked that happy-go-lucky child deep in a closet.

"I can teach it to you," he offered quietly, reaching for a towel and offering her one. She took it and wiped the sweat from her face, neck, and chest.

"I'd like that. But later. I feel flattened." Naomi grinned, inviting him to share in her joke; the man returned the smile slightly, the left side of his mouth quirking up farther than the right and making it more of a smirk.

"Thank you," he said quietly as they tidied the area up " a few weight bars _may_ have been used as sparring sticks at one point.

Naomi nodded. "Anytime, Chief." She stretched, wincing slightly. "Would you like to bunk with us?" she offered as they headed for the exit. "What with all these officers from the poor _Hakumata,_ they'll probably want to put you in with someone."

John frowned slightly, a thoughtful frown â€" though anyone looking at him who didn't know the gentleness behind that face would swear he was considering murder. Finally, he nodded slightly. "I would like that," he told her, grinning ruefully. "I'll get my stuff."

"I'll come help," she offered. He nodded thanks for the assistance â€" though he probably didn't need it; she hadn't ever seen him wear anything except the armor or a set of fatigues big enough to make a small tent.

They quickly wove through the hallways silently, trading short greetings with soldiers who passed, and John keyed in the entry code to his room. It was silent inside; Naomi looked around. It was slightly larger than a single room normally, clearly for a higher-ranking officer, but it looked barren.

There was one picture sitting on a tiny bed-side table. The bed was made neatly, almost looking unslept-in. She glanced at it and recognized John â€" unarmored, in civilian clothes, grinning as he threw a snowball at an unidentifiable woman. A large black creature romped around the woman; probably a dog, Naomi decided, though she wasn't very familiar with pets.

"Is that you?" she asked curiously, picking up the picture. The John in that picture was clearly enjoying himself, as was the woman.

The Spartan turned from where he was gathering his toiletries into a bag and smiled slightly, his eyes warming.

"Who's this?" she asked, pointing to the woman. Perhaps she was prying, but Naomi was nothing if not curious.

"Rebecca," John answered. "The dog is Chichi, her Newfie."

"A Newfie? I've heard of them. Really playful, aren't they?" She decided not to ask about this "Rebecca" â€" it was clearly something John wasn't really willing to share.

John nodded, chuckling softly. "Chichi is a very playful girl. She loves catching snowballs."

"I didn't know you had a civilian life," Naomi said lightly. John frowned slightly, a flash of unhappiness racing through his expression before it disappeared and he shrugged carefully.

"I was retired temporarily," he said, answering her unspoken question. "Rebecca and Chichi helped me adjust to civil life."

Naomi blinked. "That's right. We got rumors about it." She had been patrolling for pockets of Jackals in the Voltari quadrant at the time, and only been back for three days before the fleet had left for the rendezvous with the Sangheili.

"How was it?" she asked carefully as John packed his clothing into the single bag.

The Spartan II shrugged. "Not what I was trained for, or expecting," he admitted. Naomi nodded; she had been expecting as much, because of the II's history. "But I can proudly do any domestic task now." His chuckle was deeper this time. "Except cook anything edible."

"You can't be all that bad," Naomi protested, handing him the picture so he could wrap it carefully in a shirt and tuck it into the bag. "What about InstaRations?"

John shook his head. "I burn water. Literally. I managed to burn tea somehow."

Naomi giggled quietly. "Well, once this is all over, maybe we can work on that," she offered.

The taller man glanced down at her; something in his look made her think of a child, thrust suddenly into an unknown situation. "What?" she asked softly.

John shook his head and led the way out; she followed, silently waiting for him to answer the question. He didn't, however, as they came to the IV's bunk; Lazlakovic, anticipating the arrival, had already cleared off a bunk of their cluttered armor. The five IVs were waiting for them as they arrived; they greeted the pair with grins and a warm welcome to John.

John quickly unpacked into his small area, folding his clothing neatly into the dresser under the bed. Naomi noticed him gently put the picture at the bottom of the drawer instead of putting it on the night stand; she bit her lip, but it was John's decision, not hers.

"We have an hour until we arrive," Lazlakovic told them. "Shower up and then we'll gear up. There's no telling what's waiting for us."

John nodded, gathering a clean towel and soap from his supplies and then entering the bathroom. There were two shower stalls, cut off from the rest of the bathroom " and the single toilet " by a thin white curtain. He stepped into the tiny stall, ducking his head away from the faucet at nose-height, and undressed quickly, folding the clothing over the curtain rod. True to military standard, the Spartan showered quickly; half-way through soaping up, he heard Naomi enter and start her own shower.

They finished at the same time; John wrapped a towel around his waist " more for the IV's sake than for his " and gathered his dirty clothing before stepping out of the steamy stall. Naomi was already in the main room; John found the dirty laundry chute, tumbled his clothing down it, and then walked back to his bunk.

He could feel the IVs watching him as he crossed the small room, probably tracing the scars on his back and calves with their eyes. The taller man ignored the watchers and dried off, pulling a clean bodysuit on and sighing mentally in relief when the men and women around him went back to what they had been doing.

Lazlakovic thought about what she had just seen. John was covered in scars; she would have been hard pressed, even if she'd had ample

time to study him, to find a space more than a palm's width without scar tissue dancing crazily over it. She recognized bullet wounds, surgical scars, plasma burns, and needler punctures. There were a lot fewer bullet wounds, but the surgeries he had undergone had been fairly recent. The mythical Frankenstein, indeed.

The II turned around, now dressed in a black bodysuit that hugged his body like his own skin. Though the IVs were certainly no more modest than any other soldier, Lazlakovic was grateful John had worn a towel before leaving the shower, and had managed to get dressed without flashing them all. She had heard rumors of the II's lack of modesty.

"So," Carter said cheerfully, "maybe when we're on our way again, you can share somma those war stories, eh, brother?" John glanced at the shorter male, clearly startled â€" both at the open curiosity and the "brother" part.

He recovered quickly, though, and nodded hesitantly. "If you like," he said.

"It'd be nice t' hear th' story from someone who was actually there," Basky said quietly. "Not the official reports â€" or the bullshit we get from those kids whose parents and what have you were there."

John relaxed subtly and nodded. "And maybe you can share some of yours," he said quietly.

Landsmen groaned. "Now you've done it," he told John mock-sternly. John blinked, bewildered. "Basky's gonna talk all our ears off with that damn story about how he supposedly "rescued" me."

"I did!" Basky protested. "You were up to your ears in Grunts-"

"An' I had 'em right where I wanted 'em!" Landsmen shot back, grinning widely.

John shook his head slightly, which made Landsmen chuckle. "Oh, we're not all that bad, Chief. 'Sides, you've gotta have more interestin' stories than _us._"

"Story time later, kiddies," Lazlakovic ordered. "Admiral wants us in armor five minutes ago."

John nodded and quickly headed for the door; the IVs followed. The reported to the technicians, who strapped everyone into their armor speedily and then shoved them out the door, already turning to their next repair project. John tested the suit in the hallway, gently â€" bending, twisting, and finally running a systems check himself. He had forgotten how much he had to take care of, in regards to the armor, without Cortana.

The IVs did the same, pairing up as well to test their partner's armor by hitting it carefully, making sure nothing squeaked, rattled, or came loose. If they were going into combat, they just might need to jump ship through an airlock â€" and no one wanted to watch their partner sucked through a tiny crack in their suit.

"Alright, we're good," Carter said cheerfully. "You good,

Chief?"

John nodded, leaving his helmet on â€" now was not the time to get caught without it. "Will you be joining the DT again?" he asked.

Lazlakovic shook her head. "We're going to spread out in the hangars. If someone decides to screw with those doors again â€" well, I'd rather we be able to respond more quickly."

John nodded and headed for the cafeteria, where he found most of the DT and ordered them into the hangar. Each was already geared up and prepared for the worst; there were fewer jokes as they marched to the hangar, stragglers who hadn't been in the cafeteria trotting smartly to catch up as they heard the announcement over the speakers that the _Blade_ would soon be leaving Slipspace.

The troops filed into the Pelicans, which had been reloaded and secured more carefully, and strapped themselves in without complaint. John chose to ride with the lead Peliship, closest to the hangar doors.

The ship jumped slightly under them â€" they were out of Slipspace. John waited for something to go wrong, but nothing happened for long moments until Cortana's voice came through his speakers.

"All crew, prepare to transfer to your assigned ships."

A muted cheer rose up from inside the Pelican; they had made it safely. Cortana patched into John's helmet for a moment. "Keep yourself safe, John," she told him quietly. "You won't have me around to pull your ass out of the fire."

John smirked, chuckling faintly and making sure his external speakers were off when he answered, "As I recall, I pulled _your_ ass out of the fire plenty of times."

Cortana's voice carried that inflection that meant she was smiling, wherever her avatar was, but also slightly worried. "Seriously. You aren't used to fighting without an AI in the back of your mind, even one so 'helpful' as my little cousin."

"Thank you, Cortana." John smiled slightly; he was truly grateful for Cortana's attachment to him, and he would miss her remarks in the back of his mind, but he didn't like being mothered, either.

"See you soon. Keep yourself safe, as much as you can."

"As much as I can," John agreed. Cortana clicked off the link and John turned his attention back to the ship's pilot, who was starting to engines as the hangar doors opened â€" this time, without the explosive decompression. The ship had been leaking from the hangars purposefully so the Pelicans weren't jumbled about as the doors slid into the belly of the ship.

"We're leaving, ladies and gentlemen!" the pilot announced. The cables restraining the Pelican snapped free and the ships left the hangars in an orderly fashion, streaming towards the bulbous Sangheili warships that were barely visible, father in-system. The larger ships followed more slowly; they would jump back into

Slipspace after making a slingshot orbit around the largest planet, a gas giant, and the Sangheili would follow as soon as all the humans assigned to their ships had come aboard.

John and his Pelican headed for the largest of the ships, a flagship with gently pulsing purple sections. The trip took quite a while, though the Pelicans made their best time, and John was glad to be out of the deep space and into a more secure hangar.

He and his troops " John was technically commander of all human forces, but there was an understanding that the humans would follow their Elite commanders and work with the Grunts on equal level " left the Pelicans as the pilots shut them down in the mag-lift clamps that held them suspended in a parking lot fashion. They assembled as Thel and his commanders came down to meet the ones here; across the fleet, other commanders were greeting their human troops.

"Welcome," Thel said warmly, clasping John's forearm as the Spartan went to present his troops with his two officers. "We are grateful for your recovery." The other commanders nodded and addressed the man by his Sangheili name, which made John a little uneasy, as the two races exchanged pleasantries and reported on the numbers of soldiers of each type " Marines, ODSTs, engineers, Spartans, Minors, and Veterans " now in the fleet.

Thel turned to address the fleet once the three humans returned to their troops and stood at their head, at attention. "This alliance between our peoples, after so many years of warfare, destruction, pain, and suffering, is a new beginning. It is an honor for us to fight next to you, our allies and friends, against a common enemy who would kill and enslave us all. We fight to protect our families, our friends, and our loved ones." It was clear, to John, that Thel had had human help in this speech; he used colloquialisms that didn't translate to Sangheili. "We march together, stand together, against a threat like none we have faced before. We will fight " and die " with honor, with pride, and with humility."

The troops ooh-rahed at the end of the speech and Thel left the assignment of bunkers " a good dozen had been specially altered to fit human occupants " up to John and his officers. The soldiers began unloading the Pelicans and Peliships and carting the supplies into a warehouse-like room, where the Spartans would be bunked with their armor. Elites of the DT troops helped, but most of the other Elites on board stayed carefully separate. It would take the rest of the trip to the Brute homeworld, nearly a month-long process, for the troops to really start working together like Double Trouble.

John set his pack down on the bunk he had been assigned. It was a curious thing, made of a purple foam substance, and much softer than anything he had slept on while in the military. It bounced gently when he nudged the side with his hip. He turned back to continue the unloading process, leaving his pack on the bed. He and his troops moved several thousand kilograms of food, weapons, armor, and ammunition before the Pelicans were finally empty. Each was stacked and labeled, and the food was unpacked to prepare a meal for the humans. The Sangheili went to their own mess hall, making jokes about finally being able to eat real food.

John joined his troops for their meal; they ate spread around on creates without tables, but the more open environment made for more

jokes and laughter as they compared their living quarters here â€" more spacious than soldiers were used to, with softer beds and warmer floors â€" to those on human ships.

"I might just make this a thing!" one laughed. He turned to the Master Chief. "'Ey, Chief, think they got showers here?"

John nodded. "Sangheili shower communally," he explained. "We'll go on a tour after you all finish eating."

"Ooo, communal showers," one young man at the edge of the crowd laughed. "Girls, prepare to be amazed!" Several of the young man's comrades hooted and yelled insults at the youngster; the females in the group snorted and teased him healthily as well. John chuckled.

"Be careful," John warned. "Sangheili have strict codes of honor when it comes to sexual intercourse â€" _especially_ on the battlefield. Their ship, their rules."

"Yes, sir," the soldiers chorused, though there were mutterings and undercurrents of chuckles as John returned to his food.

"Do they _have_ female Sangheili?" one soldier asked the group at large.

"I hear they're all on the home world," another soldier laughed. "Poppin' out Elite babies!"

John shook his head, bringing their attention on him quickly. "Sir?" one man asked curiously.

"Sangheili females defend the home world. They protect their estates, make treaties for foodstuffs and goods from other states. They aren't, in any way, weaker. In fact, they might be larger. We don't know much about their culture."

"Hey â€" they picked you up, didn't they?" another asked. "From the _Dawn_."

John nodded. "This ship did â€" Thel diverted from their course to bring me back to Earth."

The soldiers turned to more interesting topics, like communal showers. John finished his food and stood. Everyone was done eating by that point; they rose with him, leaving their dirty dishes for the few who had drawn clean-up duty.

"Time for your tour. Follow closely, don't touch anything, and don't wander off." John led the way out of the garage and into the hallways. They passed several common rooms; one, a cafeteria, was packed with DT troops who saw them pass by the door and hailed them loudly. The other Elites in the large room, eating, stared at the humans, muttering among themselves in Sangheili.

John led them past and to the empty gym first. They filed into the large area â€" bigger by half than any gym on a human ship except the hybrids. The gravity here changed even though the ship didn't have a spinning center; Covenant technology included real artificial gravity. The humans took in the weights, punching bags, and

simulation areas with awe; it was more than a little impressive.

"This is the gym. It's free to use any hour. Higher-ranking Elites get precedence. The room next door is the medical bay â€" use it if you are injured. We cannot afford to have a fighter out of action right now."

The soldiers agreed heartily and John led them next to the communal showers. They, too, were empty, but by the way the soldiers gazed longingly at the shower heads â€" there were no curtains or walls between stations â€" this room wouldn't be so for long.

The troops hurried back through the hallways when John dismissed them. He followed at a more leisurely pace, the IVs right behind him. This next month would mean constant training â€" he had to get the kind of cooperation between humans and Sangheili as DT had, and quickly. He and the IVs would have to work together even more, create the kind of rapid-response team the IIs had been to such good effect. And John himself needed to get back into the lethal kind of reflexes that would keep him and his soldiers alive â€" or at least give them a better chance. The only way to do that was to spar against Veterans and Thel.

As the Spartans unarmored, the few soldiers still in the room watched covertly. John helped the IVs out of their armor first and they returned the favor, stripping the larger green armor from the taller man quickly and efficiently. John left the body suit on as he carefully stacked the pieces of the MJOLNIR; he had the armor run a self-diagnostic as he went to take a shower with his soldiers.

The bodysuit peeled from his skin as he undressed in the small "locker room" next to the bank of shower heads. There were a good deal taller than the soldiers currently using them, but they did the job. The men and women glanced at him as he joined the line of soldiers and showered; they didn't quite include him in their friendly bantering back and forth, but they made him feel welcome all the same. He finished very quickly and wrapped a towel around his midsection, stepping back into the drying area. Instead of a body suit, John put on a set of fatigues. The men and women around him dressed quickly, shivering, and then hurried back to their bunks, outpacing the Spartan again.

So much has changed, John mused to himself as he walked down the long purple hallway. _Just years ago, I was fighting through halls like these. I was killing Sangheilli â€" now I train them. What Kelly wouldn't give to see this. _

The big guy smiled softly to himself, a smile that didn't reach his face. _Well, wherever she is â€" wherever they all are â€" they'd be proud of what we've done. What they've sacrificed themselves for.

_

The IVs surrounded him when he entered their section of the garage, demanding war stories. They sat in a circle on the ground; other soldiers sauntered a little closer to overhear as the Spartans swapped tales. A few of the bolder DT troopers sat down in a circle around the circle of Spartans; others joined them slowly as they returned from the shower. They started chiming in, talking about comrades, siblings, parents, and even grandparents they had lost to

the war. Everyone gave and received in the group as they all bonded; John felt surrounded by brothers and sisters again. They were smaller, and slower, but they had that spirit of family. They teased the last Spartan II as though he was their long-lost brother, especially the IVs, once John started making jokes of his own.

Thel watched the scene from the on-board cameras, mandibles curving into a slight grin. _He_ knew the anguish that had been in his friend, beaten down by training and what the humans called "willpower." The Arbiter had not personally faced the Demon in combat, but Thel knew his friend had just become that much more dangerous for fighting, once again, at the forefront of a family.

End
file.